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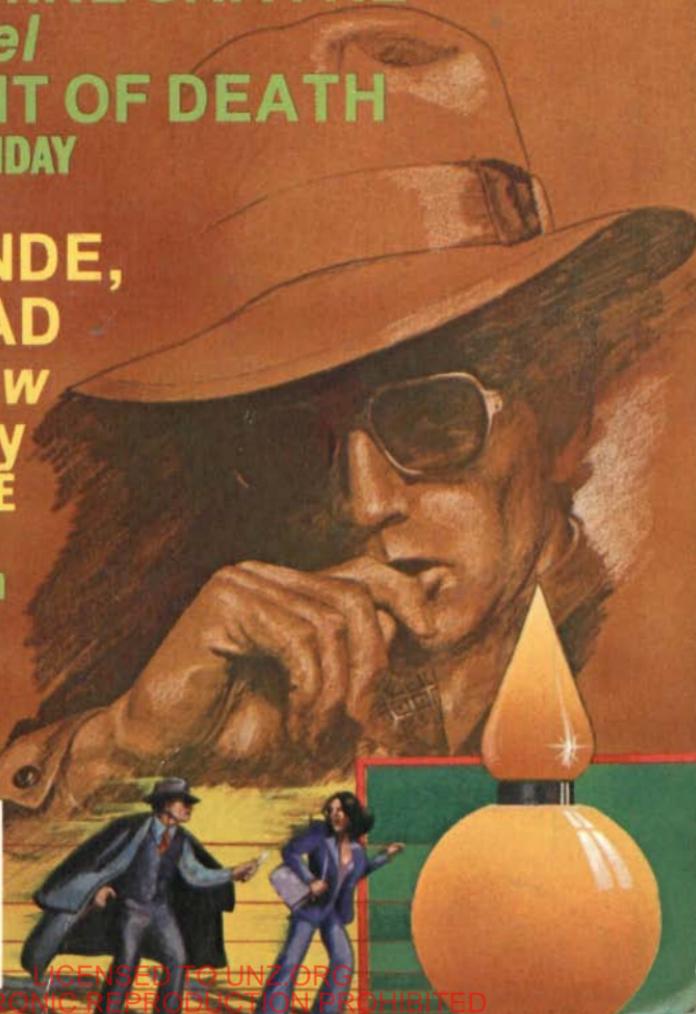
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

*The New MIKE SHAYNE
Short Novel*

THE SCENT OF DEATH
by PRETT HALLIDAY

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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

APR. 1979
VOL. 43, NO. 4

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THE SCENT OF DEATH

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The Miami Redhead is trapped in a bizarre case that revolves around a department store whose management tells shoplifters to help themselves.

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EDWARD GOLDSTEIN
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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 43, No. 4, April, 1979. Published monthly by Renown Publications, Inc., P.O. Box 178, Reseda, CA 91335. Subscription, One Year (12 issues) \$12.00; Two Years (24 issues) \$20.00; Canada, One Year \$18.50; Two Years \$28.00; Foreign, One Year \$20.00; Two Years \$30.00 (U.S. Funds Only). Second Class postage paid at Los Angeles, Calif., and at additional mailing offices. Events and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious. © 1979 by Renown Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the international and Pan-American conventions. Printed in the United States of America. Postmaster — return P.O. Box 178, Reseda, CA 91335.

The Scent of Death

BRETT HALLIDAY

Why is Miami's most successful department store encouraging shoplifting? In resolving this paradox, Mike Shayne encounters a string of murders and is forced to face the probability of his own death.

SHAYNE STALKED down the narrow corridor in the Neptune Arms, turned right, came to Gene's door and knocked. Nobody said come in. Nobody moved.

"Mike?"

Puzzled, Shayne swung around, trying to identify the source of the sound. It came from a broom closet further down the hall.

"Yeah, Gene. I hear you. Come on out."

As if easing himself from a tight coffin, Gene Randall, Head of Security, the Grand Miami Department Store, flowed into view. He looked not in the least like a brawny six-foot-six Ex-Marine. His blond hair was uncombed. He had a two-day growth of beard and his blue eyes were bloodshot.

Shayne stuck out a hand. "I got your call. I came. What's eating you?"

Gene Randall conducted him

into his bachelor pad. "It's not me so much—it's the Store. In a two-week period, I've lost two good people. One a week. I figure I'm next:

Want a drink?"

Moments later, Shayne struggled to hold himself steady in Gene's rickety leather import chair and tried to keep his drink from slopping over. "Run it one more time, Gene. What's wrong with the Store?"

"I can't explain it."

"Why not?"

Randall raised his heavy left forearm and wiped a coat of sweat from his forehead. "Look at it this way. Most stores have what they call Inventory Shortage. Sometimes it's paper, sometimes it's real theft. Mostly it's for real. They lose on an average ten percent a year, seven of that to theft. At the Grand Miami, it's

different. We don't lose—we gain. Every week we have an increase—”

Shayne tweaked his left earlobe and interrupted. “To my way of thinking, sales would account for that.

“You don't get it!” With an impatient shrug, Randall opened a big hand wide and then pulled one finger after another. “Number one—we take in about two-three thousand a week. Extra, that is—not accounted for. Number two—it shouldn't be happening. Number three—when I stake out a man to check one night, he turns up dead.

“Number four—when I put a woman in—okay, so what? She wanted the job. She's snuffed out. Number five—our boss is Mr. Fred Vellos. A smooth operator. He bought the store two years ago. Hard as steel. He's fired fifty people. Wanta know something, Mike? I hate his guts. And yet I've got fifteen years in now. I don't want to lose it.”

“So what does your Mr. Fred Vellos say about the—what did you call it—increase?”

“Says there's no such thing. Tells me to mind my own business.”

“What if you put in a full surveillance crew?”

“We did. Nothing happened.” Seeing a black cockroach scuttle past, Randall kicked at it hard and missed. “Not one damn thing. Somebody must have tipped off

the killer. He wouldn't try anything.”

Shayne shifted uneasily in his squeaky chair and tried to read whatever it was that threatened his friend. “Got any ideas?”

“Not a hint.” Gene angrily crumpled his beer can with one hand. “That's why I asked you over. I thought you might give me some pointers.”

Shayne stared at him for several long seconds. “Yeah?”

“Sure, why not? You working something heavy?”

“No.”

“I can't promise you much, if anything. But I want to get that killer. I want to get him good.”

“What about Gentry?”

“Will? Well, he tried. And Len came over and spouted wisdom. He did pin down the gun. We have a small sporting goods section in the store. The gun was right there in a locked rack. Clean. Inside and out. Not one finger-print.”

Shayne nodded. “There wouldn't be.”

“I suppose you're right.”

Shayne anchored his glass on the sawed-off block of old piling Gene used for a cocktail table. The piling had been penetrated in a thousand places by the skilled drilling of sea worms. Somehow, it reminded Shayne of the first time he had met Gene Randall.

It had been on a dark pier, down the coast. Shayne was watching

for a boat to come in—a shrimper, but not with shrimp. It was supposed to be loaded with cocaine, but that was not why Shayne was watching. Tim Rourke had tipped Shayne on how he had heard a certain Carlos Cericedes was coming into shore with a contract on the redhead's life.

Shayne had been ready, but not quite ready enough. The boat came in all right, but Carlos was not on it. He had been waiting, silently, under the pier. If it had not been for Gene who was working narc at the time, Carlos would have run a long and well-honed shiv through Shayne's heart.

With a simple flip of his wrist, Gene conked a fifty-pound lead sinker into the nape of Carlos' neck. At the time, Shayne was so shaken he neglected even to thank Gene. It wasn't until much later that he got to know and admire the big, kind-hearted lug from Wisconsin. It was the wormeaten wood which brought back memories of a dark night, spilled gasoline, a tang of salt air, and a miasmic stink of rotting fish.

Shayne glanced up at Randall. Gene's face looked pale and yellow under an abundant layer of sweat. Drops of it clung to his nose, his ears, his eyebrows. Shayne knew it was not that hot either. And suddenly, Shayne, toeing the wormeaten wood with his big left foot, felt sorry for the guy. Something, this new develop-

ment, whatever it was, had knocked Randall completely off his feet.

"Gene?"

"Yeah?"

"When do I start?"

II

THE GRAND MIAMI rose ten stories. Scanning its chrome-and-glass front, Mike Shayne knew he had not kept up with Department Store decor. A space portal could not have been bigger than its entrance. Tall glass doors self-opened. A series of white disks spun past. Shayne stepped onto one of them.

He stepped off onto a midnight black carpet. A glass case bigger than a freight car stopped his progress. In it were displayed one black flacon and three lilies. The lilies were morgue white.

There was French writing on the base of the display, and Shayne bent over to study it. The writer had made long casual flourishes, as if he were tired, or drunk, or both.

"Please, Sir!"

"Huh?"

"If you will follow me."

A white hand fluttered in front of his eyes. It seemed to Shayne that the hand was self-supporting and bodiless until he noted the girl. She was small and pale and stared down at him. Her lips were red as blood. Her face chalk white. Only her eyes looked normal. They

were green and Irish and seemed to twinkle with a sense of humor.

"Please, Sir. If you will follow me now, everything will be so much simpler . . ."

"Yeah, sure. I guess it would at that." Shayne cut his words sharply. "Why the hell should I follow you?"

A small almost indecent smile cracked the frozen mask of her face. "I'm sorry, Sir. It is not I. It is the Store. We always welcome our visitors."

"Where? To the morgue?"

"No, sir. Not to the Morgue. Perhaps we do have a slightly *outré* decor. But, I assure you, Sir, we are not a morgue. We are—"

"Yes, Lily, what is it?"

A tall girl, with hair so black it would have out-ravened ten ravens, stepped from nowhere and looked inquiringly at Shayne. "Can we help you, sir?"

Before answering, Shayne let his gaze wander around the department. Cosmetics sat under a high inner dome. White nylon ropes hung down like circus ropes from a high golden ring. Pink, yellow, green lights shot up through a glass floor. Neon tubes pulsed purple, red and orange.

"Maybe you could. Where's Mr. Vellos. He's your store manager, isn't he? And who are you?"

The tall girl blasted him with her smile. Her teeth were bright and even. Her eyes glowed with amber sparkles. Her forehead was

surgical enamel. No wrinkle had ever touched it.

"I'm Valery Hudson. Lily, here, is my helper—my official Greeter. I'm the manager of Cosmetics. You then, I take it, are not in the market for our number one perfume?"

"Not exactly." Shayne asked curiously, "What is it? It can't be that stuff in the big case."

"It can. And is, Mr. . . What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. It's Shayne—Mike Shayne."

"Well, yes, Mr. Shayne, that's the number one selling perfume in Miami. It has an interesting name. The French Importers call it *La morte douce et triste*."

"And what does that mean?"

Valery Hudson slowly opened the long white fingers of her white hand. "Loosely translated—the sweet sad smell of death."

"And people buy that?"

"You can't believe how many of them buy it. Thousands!"

"Excuse me, Miss Hudson, but how long have you been with the store?"

Her smile wilted slightly. "Five years. Two years with Mr. Vellos. Three years before him."

"Do you like him?"

Miss Hudson stared down at her long white fingers. Her smile vanished. Her fingers closed into a hard white fist.

"Well, yes," she said finally, but she didn't look at Shayne. "I like him. I think he's a good

manager. He works hard. Even late at night . . ."

She mumbled something Shayne couldn't hear. Knowing it wouldn't do any good to try and pump her further, he stopped his questioning. He thanked her. He asked her where the service desk was. Now, once more gracious and smiling, she pointed him towards the back of the store.

"Over there, beyond Furs!"

Black tiles edged Furs. Gratefully, Shayne stepped onto them. Being out there in the middle of the glass floor had given him a weird feeling of floating in space.

Furs was done in black and white tiles. They were elongated triangles, modernistic. Shayne strode into a world of mink, rabbit, fox, lynx. Snow and ice crackled and crunched. He figured the sound came from a tape deck but, even if the sound were only a recording, Winter's breath still sent a chill up and down his spine.

Shayne stopped and studied a white fur panel. It was ermine. A black dot stood in the middle of it. The dot was skunk.

What had Gene said about Furs? A big Inventory loss?

Further along, out of sight around several round columns of bunny fur, a voice spoke sharply. Shayne recognized the voice.

"Now, Miss Alexander, don't you worry. You can hold it for me. I'll be back at four with a check. You may call my bank of course. I assure you everything is in order.

Three thousand. No, that's a good price. I need it for my wife. You see, she's . . ."

It was the voice of Circus Joe.

Shayne stole a quick glance to his right. Circus Joe, his white hair brushed to silver glow, swung his black cloak loosely over his left arm. He stood talking to a young saleslady. It was quickly apparent to Shayne that Circus Joe had the girl totally snowed.

How much commission on three thousand? What disco outfit would she buy next?

Four full length mink coats were laid out in front of Circus Joe. He had fingered them thoroughly, knowing their value on the stolen goods market to the penny.

In her innocence, the girl had spread them out and had counted them many times. She was careful. She had kept them all under constant surveillance. But, no! There had been five coats. Now there were four. One of them had already found its way under Joe's cloak. He had secured it carefully with steel-strong fingers.

"Miss, once again, I must thank you. Most thoughtful of you. Oh, yes, a beautiful shade. *Gorgeous!* What did you call it?"

Another second and Joe would be on his way.

"Mr. Sloan, I will be happy to hold it for you. At six, then?"

"Yes, Indeed, Miss Alexander. You've been most helpful. *Most* helpful."

Shayne rapidly closed the

distance. He brought his hand down hard on Joe's shoulders. "Sorry, Joe. You should know better. An old dodge."

Circus Joe didn't move. He looked hurt, injured. He raised his right hand.

"No, Joe, no. I know your games. What makes you think you can get away with it in a good store?"

Joe stiffened.

"Okay, Joe, give it to me. I'll take the mink now."

"Go to hell!" Circus Joe whipped around, playing the offended customer. "Oh, it's you Shayne. You seem to be off your beat."

"The mink!"

"What mink?"

Caught between the curious eyes of the saleslady, who was now almost in tears, and the all-knowing eyes of Shayne, Circus Joe shrugged slowly. He flicked a piece of lint from his lapel. "Okay, Shayne, so what? Don't heat your water. I'm buying the mink. Any problem with that?"

"Like hell you are. You clouted it. Know something else, Joe. You're pinched, brother. Pinched!"

Shayne shifted his coat. He maintained his grip on Joe's shoulder. "Miss," he said grimly. "Call Security."

The girl dialled a number. Circus Joe said nothing. He relaxed the stiff angles of his shoulders and stood there with a

thin frown creasing his high forehead. He let one thumbnail flick carelessly back and forth across the other.

Shayne took the mink and handed it to Miss Alexander, who folded it and placed it across the back of a chair. A few minutes later, conspicuous in his red coat, Gene Randall came running down the aisle.

"Yeah, I see!" he said, when Shayne explained what had happened. "Circus Joe is known, all right. No question about that. But I can't do one single thing. Fred Vellos won't let me. He's given Joe the run of the store."

III

SHAYNE STARED at Gene in amazement, and Gene carefully avoided his look. Gene kept pulling a chrome pen out of his coat pocket, then shoving it back. He didn't look at Shayne.

"You must be kidding. A known shoplifter with the run of the store."

"You heard me."

"I don't believe it."

"Okay, don't, Mike. But it's true. Vellos won't let me touch him."

Shayne shook his head angrily. He made his way to the big chrome-and-glass service desk. It was manned by a matronly

looking woman with grey hair. She was busy shuffling through a wad of papers, but she looked up at him immediately.

"Yes, Sir?" She flicked him a brief smile. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to see Mr. Vellos. Is he in?"

She hesitated, but her hesitation might have been caused by the buzzing of the telephone. "Sorry," she said into the receiver, "I'll put you on hold. Be with you in a minute. Yes, now what was it you wanted to see Mr. Vellos about."

"Something personal."

"Sure it's nothing I can help you with?"

"I'm sure."

"Hmmm? Well, yes, Mr. Vellos is in. He will, more than likely, be happy to see you." She leaned out across the glass counter and pointed towards the elevators. "Take Number 2C. Get off on the tenth floor. Miss Ingram will direct you from there."

Miss Jill Ingram glanced up politely from her typewriter. "Can I help you?"

"I'd like to see Mr. Vellos."

Her office enclosure was pink. Her desk was pink. She wore a pink blouse, a pink skirt, and a gold chain. She gave Shayne the impression of a pink bird nesting in a pink nest. She adjusted her glasses with their dark blue rims and poked a red fingernail at a swirl of blonde hair.

"He's awfully busy."

"It's important."

"And who is calling?"

He gave her his name, but not his profession. She seemed to think about it for a second with her head tilted to one side. "OK, Mr. Shayne. I'm sure Mr. Vellos will be glad to see you. Mr. Vellos sees all customers. You are a customer, aren't you?"

"Yeah, Sure!" Shayne lied. "I'm a customer. What can you tell me about the Grand Miami?"

"Why . . . ?" The blue in her eyes went from turquoise to magenta. "Somehow, Mr. Shayne, you don't sound like a customer. You sound like a . . ."

"Private eye, maybe?"

This time her smile turned real. Her full, pink lips opened, revealing strong white teeth. Without doubt she brushed them after every meal. "Okay, Mr. Shayne, you win." She picked up her telephone. "Let me announce you. You can go right in."

A second later, having confirmed she was sending in a visitor, she pointed to a tall glass door. The door led to marble stepping stones leading across the roof between luxuriant banana stalks. For a rooftop garden, it was very impressive.

"Over ther," she said, "That's his office. It's very private. Very exclusive. That's what he calls it. He like it that way."

Shayne thanked her and walked

out into a blast of strong sunlight. A second later, having passed by a tree full of ripe mangoes, he came to a massive teak door. There was a chrome doorknob the size of a grapefruit. He grasped it, but the knob was only for looks. The door opened automatically. Shayne entered.

The office was big and massive. Black and silver predominated. The desk was black. The chairs were silver. The walls were black. Floor and ceiling were silver. One touch of color hung on a wall behind the desk, where the desk's occupant would never have to look at it.

It was a modern painting. Red, yellow, orange swirled in concentric circles. Shayne figured it wouldn't have a name. A painting like that would have maybe a number, maybe a series of numbers.

"Mr. Vellos?"

The man behind the desk said nothing. Shayne walked to within a yard of the desk. The chill emanated neither from the man's eyes, nor from his complete composure. The chill came from his silence.

The man said nothing.

He did not move. He said no word. Shayne detected only one brief suggestion of movement, which might not have been a movement anyway. It came from the left corner of the man's thin upper lip, as if his lip were going to be drawn back into a sudden,

feral snarl. The snarl didn't come. The man didn't speak either. He stared through Shayne, "Mr. Vellos, I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

Shayne studied the hard face under its heavy leather tan. The brown hair had been nicely clipped in an expensive style, neither too long, nor too short. The brown suit looked in the neighborhood of a thousand. It had Italy written all over it, and Mr. Vellos' gold tie was neither too bright, nor too dull. It had the look of being made from silk mellowed in rich honey for just the right amount of time.

The man's hands lay palms down on his desk. His fingernails were nicely manicured. They glowed softly with a pink pearl shine.

Fred Vellos could have been younger than thirty-five, but he certainly looked no older. His total calm, his immense relaxation got on Shayne's nerves. Shayne tweaked his left earlobe and studied the black mirror surface of the desk. It reflected a cold visage, a cold white shirt collar.

"Mr. Vellos?" Shayne stepped closer to the desk. The man did not move. He didn't even bother to look up. He kept his gaze fastened on the middle button of Shayne's coat. "Mr. Vellos, your store is being ripped off. I came through your Fur Department. I picked up a known shoplifter. Your security man made me

let him go. Why?"

"Do you know this shoplifter's name?"

"Circus Joe."

Vellos' fingers tensed slightly. "Mr. Shayne, I'm sorry. That's not a name. What is his real name?"

"Anthony Ballestri." Shayne leaned over the desk's black marble surface. "Tony Ballestri. He has a record a mile long. Not only here in Miami—in every state of the Union."

"So?"

"So, okay. He was ripping off a mink coat. He cons your clerk and makes off with merchandise. Like magic. I've seen him in operation. Smooth as cream."

"Mr. Shayne, whose store is this?"

"Yours."

"Right. You understand perfectly. I run it the way I want to run it. You've told me nothing. Anything else, Mr. Shayne—*Mr. Mike Shayne*?"

Shayne turned and walked towards the door. When he reached it, he swung and said, "There is something else, Mr. Vellos. Maybe you do call it nothing. But you've had a couple of murders. Two right here in this store. You haven't forgotten those, have you?"

Vellos' dark eyes moved up from Shayne's waist level to Shayne's eye level. They were hard and impenetrable. Shayne got the feeling he was looking into

the eyes of a killer.

"No, Mr. Shayne," Vellos said, "I have not forgotten. I never forget. Remember that, Mr. Shayne—I never forget."

Feeling as if somebody had dumped a bucket of ice cubes down his back, silence followed him out of the room. Silence followed him across the rooftop into the bright sun, and even the sun didn't take off the chill.

Shayne stopped at Miss Ingram's pink desk. It made a warm, happy spot in the cold. He shivered in spite of himself. Jill Ingram glanced up from her typing. "Mr. Shayne, what's the matter? You look frozen. This is Miami. It's never cold here."

Shayne flicked a cigarette out of his pack, said, "Sister, that's where you're wrong." He lit his cigarette. "Very wrong indeed."

IV

IT WAS 3 PM, the next day. Shayne dug a cigarette from his pack, jammed it into the left corner of his mouth. Nothing sat right. What was going on behind the scenes? Why was Fred Vellos surrounded by an impenetrable arctic glacier? What chill clung to his past, his present, his future?

Making a direct attempt to crack that ice, Shayne dialed the store, asked for Cosmetics, got Valery Hudson. She was distant, weak, inaudible. "Yes. Why, yes,

Mr. Shayne. Yes, I do remember. What happened? I mean, between you and Mr. Vellos?"

"Not much. Could I ask you a couple of questions?"

"I guess so." Her voice sounded fuzzy. "Sure. Why, yes. But I have a customer now, who . . ."

"Miss Hudson, I don't mean like this. Not on the phone. I mean in private. How about it? Would you consider going out to dinner with me?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne!" Cold steel entered her voice. "I don't make dates with strangers. No, please—I don't mean that. I don't mean to be rude. Can you assure me . . .?"

"Assure you what?"

"That *this* is all right."

"Of course."

"Okay, then." She turned wistful. "Do me a favor. Okay, if I pick the place?"

"Sure. What time?"

"Call for me at seven."

Shayne took down her address, her phone number. He plunked down in his favorite chair feeling irritable. Too many shades of meaning had crept into her voice. What was wrong with her? For such a good looking wench, why wasn't she overrun with boy friends? Why had dating her been so easy?

He fingered his cigarette but didn't light it.

Nothing made sense. Neither that Fench perfume with its morbid name, nor the tiny spooky

girl, nor Mr. Vellos. Everything in the Grand Miami ran against the grain—not the least of which was Circus Joe. Nor was Valery Hudson your usual type of girl either. She had a large amount of class. Yet some hidden wound flawed her personality. What was it?

They ended up at the Beach in the newest Grand Slam Space Splash restaurant. "You'll love it," she had said. "The seafood is out of this world."

"I'll bet it is."

"Now, Mr. Shayne, don't go sarcastic on me."

With her sharp sidewise glance leaving him feeling sheepish, Shayne braked for a light, then shot rapidly forward.

"After all," she murmured, "how many possible decors can you dream up for a seafood restaurant? The wharf bit? The ship bit? Like whatever? But the Space Splash is really different."

Shayne looked at her. Wriggling luxuriously, she eased herself back against the seat of his Buick. "And they do have steaks too."

"Miss Hudson, how long have you been in Miami?"

"Five years. I came from Wisconsin, a small town near Appleton. I came to Miami because . . ."

Her tapping fingers strayed along the dashboard. "What happened is kind of sad. I followed a guy here. What we had going wasn't maybe too much. It died.

Later, I started at the store. Working has given me an entirely sensible way of looking at things. Mom was right. I'm happier. Almost content . . . ”

“But you're not?” Shayne swung out onto the Julia Tuttle causeway and steadied his wheel.

“Not entirely. Not now. It was better before. Before *he* came. I mean before Mr. Vellos came. We had more fun. It was a great store. We had a ball. But now . . . ”

“Now, what?”

“I don't know.” Her eyes were troubled. “I have a funny feeling. It's all so different. Know what I mean? As if you were sitting on top of an earthquake, waiting for it to happen. It's not right—not knowing.”

Shayne forced a smile and told her he understood.

From the outside, the Space Splash wasn't much. A sign—nothing more. At the point of entry, a ring of bright stainless steel circled an exceedingly dark tunnel entrance. Shayne paused, trying to get his bearings. Valery's hand met his.

“Scared?”

“Of what?”

“I don't know. Come *on!*” A series of purple lights bleeped at lightning speed along floor and ceiling. “We're ready for take-off!”

On the inside, the room opened grandly into a Space Cathedral. Valery gurgled and pointed. A

high open ceiling rose on grids of bronzed aluminum struts. At intervals of five or six seconds, red, yellow and blue space ships zoomed past.

“Mr. Shayne—*look!* Self-levitating tables.” Valery showed him how concealed rods attached stainless steel disks to grey concrete walls.

On a high pedestal, an organ player sat behind a lucite shield and ran through set after set of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. The place was moderately crowded. Shayne looked around and didn't recognize anyone he knew. He could see that everybody was talking at once, but the vastness of the room dulled and deadened the conversation.

“Like it?”

“I don't know.”

“Billy Dane did the panels over there.”

Shayne followed her pointing finger and stared at the bar and at three metal panels that must have measured twelve by twelve. One was blue. One was green, the other was yellow.

A cocktail waitress in a red metallic suit seated them. Shayne fingered his cold steel table and stared at the copper place mat made from copper wire. He felt chilled. To bring some warmth to this galactic setting, he ordered a Martell and soda for himself and a gimlet for her.

“Come here often?”

“Some.”

In the way of food and drink, she knew exactly what she wanted. "They have excellent rock crab. Bread, imported from . . ."

"France?"

"No, silly, San Francisco. Sourdough! You'll love it."

He did. It came warm, with generous hunks of butter on a blue plate. He crunched it gladly. Warmed by the gimlet, Valery's face went soft, then taut, then soft again. Shayne felt better. His drink eased the cold steel of the room. He no longer hung motionless in outer space.

"Know how many times I saw *Star Wars?*" Tiny gold flecks shot through the amber of her eyes. "Bet you can't guess."

"I wouldn't try."

"Ten."

"Why?"

"Brings out the innocence in me, I guess. I don't know. Not that I'm so damned innocent. Nor so damned contaminated."

"Contaminated?"

A green gauze drew across the surface of her eyes. The corners of her lips whitened. She hurriedly gulped her gimlet, and she didn't look at him. She stared across the room.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. It's nothing—nothing at all. Did you like your steak?"

Shayne studied its remains, the gleam of bone, the soft heap of pink crab shell on her blue plate. Thoughtfully he forked up

a mouthful of green butter lettuce. He knew it was real Roquefort dressing. He could taste it. It was entirely delicious. Seeing Valery like that, half close, half distant, Shayne felt a twinge of desire.

Her dark wavy hair made a soft tent over the white expanse of her forehead. Her lips were wide and generous. Her fingers were long, smooth, sensually inviting. As if sensing his thoughts, they strayed over and poked at the heavy red hairs on the back of his left hand.

"Married?"

"No."

"Why did you want to see me?"

"What can you tell me about the Store? What's gone wrong? Even you react oddly when you start to talk about it. Why, Valery?"

Suddenly alert, she tried to snatch back her hand, but Shayne closed his fingers over her wrist.

"Why?"

"Let me go! You're hurting me."

"Two murders. Gene going nuts. A killer on the loose—and you don't want to talk."

"I don't know anything. Nothing! You're hurting me."

Shayne let go of her wrist, and she sat there rubbing it with her right hand. For a long time, she had no color in her face. No color at all. But it finally came

back, with a faint greenish tinge.

"Jill told me not to go out with you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, she said you'd be poison. You are."

Shayne sipped his Martell. "Valerie, you've got me all wrong. I only kill when I have to. Not when—"

"When what?"

V

SHAYNE CAUGHT the sudden jump in her eyes, the sharp break in her voice. He swung around to see what she was looking at. Behind him, at the far end of the long circular bar, sat Circus Joe. Joe had laid his black cloak across the dark teak. A green light caught his profile. His silver hair was carefully brushed.

"Know him?" Shayne asked.

"No. Well, that is . . . No, I'm sorry. I don't know what you mean." Valery picked up a piece of crab and then let it drop on her plate. "Nobody I know. I was thinking of something else. Remember, how startled you looked when I translated that French perfume for you? I didn't know you were a private eye. I thought you were—"

"Who told you?"

"Jill! Jill Ingram."

Shayne felt her knee. It was close to his. It was not visible, but he could sense the pressure of her sleek stocking.

"That man? Over *there*."

"I don't know him."

"You don't know Circus Joe?"

"No."

Shayne wondered why she was lying. What tied her together with that known shoplifter? And exactly to what contamination did she refer? Her knee pressed his. Her fingers toyed with the red hairs on the back of his left hand.

"I'll never forget the first time I saw him."

"Circus Joe?"

"No. Fred Vellos. I had heard we had a new owner. But he never came by and introduced himself. Once I was working a new display. He materialized out of nowhere. He smiled—like a barracuda, Didn't say one word."

"Miss Hudson, do you figure he might have bumped off a couple of people?"

She looked hurt. "Why should he? He's the boss. Why should he go around killing people?"

"Yeah, sure! *Why?*"

Shayne drove Valery back to her apartment on Bayshore. She asked him in. Shayne refused.

"Maybe some other time, then?" Her voice pulsed with a dreamy suggestion. "I wouldn't ask, if I didn't mean it."

"Yeah, sure."

She thanked Shayne and he left, not knowing much more than he had started with. Of one thing he was sure. Valery Hudson

knew Circus Joe. But what was the connection? And why did she deny it?

Shayne rode up in the self service elevator. On the way down the hall towards his door, he stopped dead. The hall looked the same—same ugly carpet, same dull paint. He listened. There was no sound. Outside, a car squealed around a corner. That was all. It was a scent. Nothing else. Its putrid sweet smell hung in the air. He recognized it then.

La morte douce et triste.

Who had been wearing it? And why?

Then he heard his phone and he moved to answer it.

“Mike?”

“Yeah, Tim.”

“Heard you were on a case. Not something to do with Gene Randall, was it?”

“Why?” Shayne held the phone in an ice cold hand.

“I got word a few minutes ago. Gene’s dead. Stabbed in the back.”

“Stabbed?”

“Yeah, with a hunting knife. One of Gene’s. In his own apartment. No sign of a struggle. Nothing out of place. Somebody must have been waiting for him. Gentry can’t figure it. Mike, you listening?”

“Yeah, I’m listening.”

“Okay, you old cognac hound. What are you going to do about it?”

“Where was Vellos when it happened?”

“I thought you might ask that.” Tim sounded excited. “Gentry checked. Vellos was at home. He’s got a big place out in Bal Harbour. He was seen there. Not a chance, Mike. Not a chance in the world.”

“Tim, do me a favor. Find out all you can about Vellos. Dig up anything—everything. Turn over every resource you got in this country. Okay?”

Tim laughed. “It won’t do you a bit of good, Mike. Not a bit. I’ve got most of it now, anyway. Tomorrow, I’ll have the rest. Where do you want to talk. Here, or there?”

“There.”

VI

SHAYNE CLENCHED his teeth. Being run through a compactor couldn’t have made him feel worse. He perked a pot of coffee and the coffee tasted like mud from the bottom of Biscayne Bay.

During the night, he had snapped awake, thinking he heard a window shatter in his apartment. For several seconds, he had fumbled around trying to find the light. Even with the light on, he could still feel and sense an invisible threat.

What was it?

He couldn’t pinpoint where it was coming from, but he knew

it was directed at him. He circled around and checked his windows, his door. He found everything secure, but he was bothered.

As soon as he got back into bed, he wadded up his pillow and propped up his head, trying to think. He smelled it then. The scent was stronger than it had been outside in the hall. It was the same deadly perfume.

Where had it come from?

Why?

Shayne scrambled three eggs with butter. He made a new pot of coffee and this time he took down the Martell and mixed the usual. Somehow, the raw, black pungent mix cleared his head. Now, he felt almost half human. Or he would have felt human, if he had not remembered going to Gene Randall's pad.

Gene had lain sprawled face down across his own worm-eaten cocktail table. He had kicked back and caught one foot in his old sofa. With his other foot, he had knocked over a can of beer.

He was still wearing his red security jacket and a pair of cheap black moccasins. His right hand was tucked under him. His left hand held his handcuffs. The knife, a well-honed Buck Knife, protruded from his back. Will Gentry was not sure whether it had been thrown or driven by a blow.

To Shayne's way of thinking, it was always risky to come up against a man with a thrown

knife. Only too easily, ribs can deflect a blade. In this case, they had not. Gene must have died within seconds.

Shayne swung into his Buick, adjusted his rear view mirror, turned his key. Nothing happened. There was no sign of life. He shoved himself out and looked under the hood. The battery looked okay, but he couldn't tell. Cursing the car, his sick head and half dozen other hindrances, Shayne walked out on Twelfth. Nothing looked quite right out there either, but he knew where he could find a cab.

Tom Cassidy's cab was not at its usual stand. While Shayne waited in the thick spill of sunlight, he thought about Fred Vellos. What exactly was wrong with Mr. Vellos? What was wrong with the Store? What was wrong with the perfume?

Too cold a silence surrounded the man. Nobody in the store seemed to know him. If they did, they weren't talking. Fred Vellos had a face like a computer—an IBM machine, maybe.

A lot of figures were turning over on the inside, but on the outside nothing showed.

And Valery?

Shayne smiled, frowned, smiled again. He felt a twinge of desire. She reminded him very much of Roquefort dressing. He found her both extremely attractive, and yet somehow repellent.

He shook the vision out of his

head and concentrated on Valery the woman. She was twenty-five. She would be good in bed. What was wrong with her? Why didn't she come on like the usual betrayed young female? Did her story ring true? Most of all, how well did she know Fred Vellos?

And why was she put off by Circus Joe?

Shayne ground his cigarette with his heel, gave up on Cassidy and decided he would walk over to the next block. He turned down an old and familiar alley which he knew would bring him out quicker on the shady side of the street.

He was surprised to see a boy of about six pop up and yell at him.

"Mister, watch out!"

The engine of a big, heavy car roared close behind him. Shayne jumped, caught the end of a fire escape and swung his body up from the alley. The moment he did that, the metal aerial on the side of the car lashed his hips. The pain was fierce, but he rolled up and away, and the big black Cadillac shot past underneath.

Shayne looked for the small boy. The kid was gone. Shayne had caught only a quick glimpse of the driver. Circus Joe had been at the wheel. Shayne knocked dirt from his hat, and shook his head. This attempt, along with Gene's murder, added up to one conclusion. Shayne was in combat.

One person Shayne depended on was Tim. Without doubt, Tim would be at home. Shayne pressed the bell. There was no answer. Tim had promised to be there at eleven, taking an early lunch.

"Don't you give it a second thought," he had said. "I'll have most of your answers."

Shayne pushed the bell several times. Tim did not respond. Shayne gave the door an experimental kick. Nothing happened.

At the corner drug store, he called Tim's desk at the Miami News. No answer. He got the city room. Nobody had seen him. Shayne couldn't believe that the tall, skinny skeleton had left him in the lurch. Tim wasn't like that.

Baffled, Mike Shayne decided he would try Tim's favorite watering hole. He went to The Beef House on Miami Avenue. Sitting at the bar was Tim. Tim couldn't have been happier. With great and mournful glee, he shook his head from side to side when he saw Shayne staring down at him.

"Mike—aw, listen fellow. You don't have to come in and spoil a man's drink. Staring at me like that. Me, for one, I didn't go out just now and try to get myself killed."

"Who the hell told you that?" Shayne swung onto a stool. "I scarcely knew it myself. It

only happened minutes ago."

"I have my own private listening posts."

"Yeah, I guess. So why weren't you home?"

"I had a delay. A little extra-curricular matter, you might call it."

"What was her name?"

"Now isn't that something? What a guess! Sometimes, Mike, you're not half bad. A very delectable young lady. Tall, though. She kind of ran into me."

"That figures."

"Wait, Mike—wait. Wait until you hear her name."

Shayne gulped his drink. "I'm waiting."

"Valery—Valery Hudson. Matter of fact, she dropped by the *Miami News*—to see me. My own sweet little loveable self."

Shayne couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. "You must be kidding. She did *what*?"

"Now, Mike. It was all very much business as we say in the trade. Nothing wrong at all. Seems she was only trying to dig out of me all that I might know about you. Your girlfriends. The size of your boxer shorts. That kind of thing. Seems she's quite fond of you, Mike. Anyhow . . ."

"Anyhow, you took her out to a bar on the company's time."

"Quite right."

"What did you tell her?"

"Nothing good, Mike. How you lead all the young ladies astray. How you attract trouble as a light-

ning rod attracts lightning. That sort of thing."

"Thanks a million! How do you figure her, Tim? What's wrong with her?"

Tim lowered his bony chin until it almost touched the bar. "You got me! I never bumped into a chick quite like her. On the one hand, a looker. On the other, I don't know—maybe dynamite."

Shayne nodded. "My own sentiments on the subject. So what did you find out about our friend, Mr. Fred Velloz?"

Tim took a drink. Instead of answering, he stretched his chin and neck up at the ceiling until he looked like a scrawny turtle. "Yeah, well! It's not easy. Rumor has it he originated in Montreal a few years back. No handle to it though. Pure rumor. He was out on the West Coast—nobody knows where. More recently he owned a store up in Montana—in a place called Missoula."

"Later, he owned one in New Hampshire. He's been around. In business circles, he's a newcomer. But he's made a name. And he's made money."

"No mob tie-ins?"

Tim stretched his bony hand around his glass of rye and rattled the ice cubes in it before raising it to his lips. "None. Totally clean. Like I mean Ivory soap has nothing on our boy."

"What does Will think?"

"You talked to Will yourself. What did he say?"

Shayne took a big drag on his cigarette. He remembered the strange way Will had kept puffing on his big black cigar. Even stranger had been the way Will kept staring at him from up and under his bushy eyebrows.

"You got hallucinations, Mike," Will had said. "I talked to him. He was at home. What more do you want to know."

"I don't believe it."

"You'd better believe it, Mike. There's nothing tying Mr. Vellos to this killing. It's tough on you. I'm damn sorry about Gene. But, Mike, the point is this. Mr. Vellos is a big man. Sure, there are bigger ones. But no owner of a big store like the Grand Miami would mix himself up with a couple of stupid murders."

"Think so?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Okay, Will.—Thanks. I'll see you."

"Sure, Mike. Sure."

Outside The Beef House, Shayne stared into the sunlight and knew he had one helluva headache. He felt tired. He felt depressed. What the hell was wrong with him? When he glanced across the street, it didn't surprise him one bit to catch sight of a tall individual disappearing into an open door.

He felt it was nobody he knew. But he wasn't sure. On the other hand, he was sure it wasn't Circus Joe. Shayne rubbed his neck, bunched his shoulders,

walked quickly across the street. It was a simple fashion boutique. A door. A window. Handbags—most of them leather. A willowy blonde peered from the back.

He went up to her. Her eyes had a distant, dull sheen.

"Anybody come in here?"

"No."

Shayne played a hunch. "You wouldn't happen to know a Miss Valéry Hudson from the Grand Miami, would you?"

"Strange your asking." She smiled silkily. "Guess what? I do know Valery. Quite well. She comes in here sometimes. We are old friends. Why?"

Shayne raked his fingernail across his chin and wished he'd shaved a little more carefully. "Thought I'd ask. Have you seen her recently?"

"No. Not for a couple weeks."

"I guess she didn't walk in here just now. Like maybe a couple of minutes ago."

"No way! I'm sure she's very busy at the store. She works everyday from nine until six. And, Mister, know something?"

"What?"

"Get lost!"

VII

THE GRAND MIAMI towered ten stories above Shayne. It was night. From across the street where he had parked, Shayne studied the flow of customers. The

great majority were sleek women, who lifted their knees high, clattered their high heels, who laughed gaily. Shayne was tired. Three hours of it was too much. Nothing suspicious took place. The store was busy. That was all. busy. That was all.

After the store closed, he circled the block several times. Nothing happened. Shayne pulled to the curb and slid out. He wasn't sure what he was looking for.

The air felt warm, damp, expectant, full of rain. He knew the answer had to be there in the Grand Miami. But, how in hell was he going to find it? In front, parked in the center of the sidewalk, stood a glass case bigger than Grant's Tomb. Inside, a black flacon of perfume and two white lilies radiated their atmosphere of the city morgue in a warm pink light.

A dark shape passed in the street, and Shayne saw its reflection in the glass. It was a black van. He caught a flash of metal. Shayne threw himself down. A bullet zinged over his head and penetrated the glass showcase.

Shayne whirled to his feet and raced for his Buick. Behind him, with cold silent drip, the bottle of *La morte douce et triste* emptied itself slowly onto the concrete.

The black van spun around a corner and disappeared.

When he thought back on it, Shayne knew he had been too

slow. He had rolled after the van in the same gung ho way, but he had slowed at every corner. He had stopped for lights. It was no good.

Too many things were unanswered. First he smelled that deadly perfume in his hall, then in his apartment. He had no real answer to that. Who would wear such ghastly stuff anyway? Next his car wouldn't start, then it did.

Shayne made up his mind to check out Vellos' house. He swung towards Bal Harbour. The house sat back a hundred yards from the street. It had more than its share of palms, cypress, and bougainvillaea. A red Porsche sat in the drive. The house, Spanish with red tile, blazed with lights. Behind closed Venetian blinds there was movement.

Tim had told Shayne how Vellos employed two people. There was a Cuban cleaning lady, Mrs. Santos, and Koto, the oriental houseboy. Shayne couldn't figure them being there that late, but maybe they were.

Somewhere far off, a stereo blasted forth *Saturday Night Fever*.

Shayne was leaning over his ignition key ready to take off, when a black-and-white patrol car swung past on one of its usual surveillance runs. Two cops flashed their spotlight over his Buick. Resignedly, Shayne

raised his right hand, waved, then took off for his own apartment.

Stepping from the elevator, he heard his phone. He hurried in, figuring it might be Tim, with some more news. But it wasn't Tim. Shayne failed to recognize the soft female voice.

"Who'd you say it was?"

"I'm Jill Ingram. You met me yesterday. I'm personal secretary to Mr. Vellos."

"Okay. What do you want?"

"Have you seen Valery?"

Shayne's phone all but slipped from his hand. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne. I thought maybe she was with you. I guess you didn't know this, but Valery is my roommate. I haven't seen her all day. What makes me worried is that . . ."

"Is what?"

"Are you sure she didn't tell you we were roommates? No? I wonder why? We've been roommates since Valery started working at the Store. She's my pal. We were kids together in Wisconsin. I came down here first. Valery followed. That's when she was still running around with Ted Bascom."

"The guy who burned her?"

"Right."

"And now you don't know where she is?"

"No."

"Miss Ingram, what do you want me to do?"

"Like I thought maybe you could look for her. I'm worried. She might be in trouble. Like . . ."

"What sort of trouble?"

Jill Ingram's voice faded into a small, weak sound. "I'm not sure, but something is bugging Valery. Something big. She won't tell me what it is. Hasn't said one word to me. But I watch her around the apartment, and I know. She doesn't eat. She doesn't sleep. She's . . ."

"But you are her friend. What's bugging her? Why? Haven't you talked to her?"

"She won't talk."

"Miss Ingram,"—Shayne made a sudden decision—"I'll drop over. We could run through a few bars. Not that it'll do any good. Who knows? It might. Where can I pick you up?"

"In front of our place in fifteen minutes?"

VIII

SHAYNE CHECKED his memory of Jill Ingram. He remembered her as warm and pink with honey-blonde hair. She smiled warmly all right, but this time she was no longer a vision in pink. She wore a pantsuit of light powder blue. A dark green scarf coiled loosely about her neck.

Her right hand held a blue leather bag, and her fingers were trembling. She peered in at him curiously.

"Are you always on time?"

Shayne held the door open. She slid in easily but started digging immediately for a cigarette.

"Here." Shayne offered her one of his. "If you can take it without filters."

"I can."

Shayne drove out along Miami Avenue. For the first few blocks, Jill didn't say a word.

"Know something?" she said finally. "It's a man. I think it's a man anyway. But I don't know who. Mr. Shayne, by the way, thanks for listening to me. Valery spoke about you. She likes you a lot."

"She's a nice kid."

Shayne swung away from Miami and crossed over to Flagler. He felt as if he were caught in some wild and extravagant goose chase, but he played along with it.

"No idea where she might be?"

"Not really. I'm sorry."

"How come Valery doesn't date?"

Jill took a long drag on her cigarette, sighed. "She does—I think she does. But not often. Not since Ted . . ."

"I get it."

"Mr. Shayne, how many bars are there in Miami?"

"Thousands. And they're all big and dark and hard to find your way around in."

Shayne considered the possibilities. One looked likely. He

swung for the Julia Tuttle Causeway. For some personal reason or other, Valery had found the Space Splash extremely attractive. He knew he would have to check it.

"Know your boss well?"

"Mr. Velloz?"

"Yeah."

"I've worked for him for two years. That's all. I see him come in at nine in the morning. Sometimes I see him go home at five in the afternoon. That's about the size of it."

Shayne parked. Taking Jill by the elbow, he escorted her to the dark entrance. Purple lights bleeped on and off. The room rocked with a big crowd and the sound of *Star Wars*. Shayne took a careful look around, but saw no sign of Valery.

A cocktail waitress offered them a table. Shayne refused, saying he preferred the bar. At the far end of the crescent, where the bar bent back on itself into the wall, was a hidden niche. In the niche sat Valery Hudson. She had her back turned to Shayne.

Close to Valery, whispering in her ear, sat Circus Joe. The whiteness of Valery's shoulders intensified the raven color of her hair. A rose-colored dress clung tightly to well-shaped flesh. A string of pearls glistened at her neck. Joe's hand rested on her shoulder, and Joe kept fingering the pearls.

Shayne turned to walk away, but Jill wouldn't let him.

"*Valery!*" Jill gushed. "I've been so worried about you. You didn't tell me. Mr. Shayne here was kind enough to . . ."

"You bastard!" Valery glanced at Shayne. "Jill, why did you have to bring *him*?"

"*Valery, please!*"

"Get him out of here—*now!*"

Joe moved quickly. He slid off his bar stool with one well-oiled motion. He stood there watching Shayne, and a small tight smile played across his lips. Joe's hair had been brushed to a silver sheen. His black cloak lay folded loosely on the bar.

Shayne didn't say a word.

"But, Valery, listen. You *can't*. How *can* you? This man is a thief. He's a shoplifter. Maybe even worse. Didn't Gene tell you?"

"Gene is dead."

"But . . ."

Suddenly violence sparked in Valery's eyes. Shayne was alert. Valery kicked off her right shoe. She stooped. She came at Shayne with its heel.

"No, you don't." Shayne cuffed it out of her hand. "Calm down!"

Trying to hold her was like trying to hold a wet eel. She squirmed away. Shayne grabbed her. Valery elbowed him in the side. Tied up as he was, Shayne couldn't pay much attention to Circus Joe. Upright and relaxed at the bar, Circus Joe was folding

and wadding his cloak in his right hand.

Shayne tried to duck, but he was too late. With the velocity of a pile driver, Joe's lead-lined seam crashed down on Shayne's neck and shoulders. Shayne tumbled to his hands and knees.

As he shoved himself up, he watched two black Guccis shuffling rapidly towards him. He lurched to one side, felt the sting of the cloak on his right hip, then threw himself forward. He yanked Joe's foot. Joe went down.

Shayne stumbled to his feet, but he wasn't fast enough. Joe beat him by a split second. Joe swung his cloak and pivoted for the kill. He backed off. He fainted.

Jill and Valery were both screaming, and the bar crowd made a wild scramble away from the fight. The bartender leaned over the bar and studied the action. In his right hand was a bottle of gin, but obviously he didn't know what to do with it.

"Shayne. Now it's *my* turn!"

Circus Joe's face was machined from steel. He raised his left hand, held it steady, aiming it straight out. He crouched, and, as he crouched, his right hand came down with its long heavy weight.

Shayne ducked to the right. Joe struck again. Shayne bounced to the left. With Joe dancing around like a maniac, Shayne was afraid it could go on all night. With

Joe's next rush, Shayne gritted his teeth and made up his mind.

He went in fast under the cloak. Pain stung his shoulder, but he followed through with a strong right to Joe's jaw. Then, using all his strength, Shayne socked his left fist into Joe's ear. Screaming now, Joe dropped his cloak. He flailed the air, grabbing for his throat, then crashed backwards into a bar stool.

Joe didn't get up.

Shayne grabbed Valery by the wrist and dragged her from the room. Valery kept tugging her skirt down, but Shayne didn't stop. Jill followed at a quiet and respectful distance.

The bartender yelled cops, laws, jail. He had forgotten his phone. Meanwhile Shayne shot out of the Space Splash and into his car. He was far off when the first flashing red lights showed up.

Jill sat silently in the back, Valery silently in front. Shayne had the feeling he was driving in a funeral cortege. It didn't help to know Valery was wearing that perfume he hated so much.

"What were you doing with Circus Joe?"

"Nothing."

Shayne made a quick stop in front of their apartment and let them out. Jill thanked him. Valery did not. Shayne's last look at Valery showed red lips

well drawn back exposing gleaming white teeth. Ironically, she looked far more exciting than ever.

On the way home, Shayne opened all his Buick windows wide and tried to blast the soft sweet scent of death from his car. What had Valery said about it?

"Know something, Mike? That scent lingers for a long, long time. Remember! For eternity . . ."

IX

FOR THE TAIL job he had in mind, Shayne picked his rental car with great care. He got a dark Camaro. It had a low sloping rear window, and its glass was darkly tinted. He wasn't happy about the Out of State license plates, but he had to put up with them. They were from, of all places, Maine.

His check-ups on Circus Joe showed the man usually entered the Grand Miami about eight at night, stayed for half an hour or so and then sauntered back out. With him he carried whatever merchandise he had stolen. Usually he had it well wrapped in his ubiquitous black cloak. Sometimes, but not often, he made use of a booster box.

Gene had explained, how, usually during the Christmas Rush, a thief would come in with a wrapped box made to look like

a regular gift item. The box was empty inside. A hinged lid on the bottom permitted it to be dropped over some choice merchandise so the merchandise could be carried away.

It was a gimmick. Like all other gimicks!

Mostly, Circus Joe shunned them as having really nothing to do with his trade. Hidden inside his rental car, Shayne continued his long stake out. From memory, and Tim's research, he dragged other bits and pieces about Circus Joe. Some of them came from Gene. Some from Will Gentry. Circus Joe had actually grown up in a circus, had developed into a promising trapeze artist. Little by little, women and high living took their toll. Joe couldn't survive in the circus and had turned to shop lifting, picking only the fancier stores, only the highest priced, most first class merchandise.

Back five years before, Circus Joe had tied in with a high society dame, by the name of Lucy Snow. He had taken her for a bundle. At one stage, she had promised to marry him. At the last minute, a few grains of common sense returned to her, for she caught a plane for Rome and never came back.

It mystified Shayne how Vellos put up with the crook. Even more than Vellos' tie-in with Joe,

it shook the hell out of him how Valery would have anything to do with the guy. Yet she seemed to go for him in a big way. Nothing about Valery made sense. Certainly not her odd streaks. Why, How, and Where had she got hooked up with that rat?

Shayne rubbed his neck and winced.

He was parked half a block south of the Store and was eyeballing the entrance through his rearview mirror. He had smoked a couple of cigarettes, but they had all tasted bad. He wondered if he shouldn't give up smoking. At one time Lucy had quit, but then she had started again.

"You know damn well, Michael," she'd said. "If you do it, I have to."

He had not been to his office in days, and he figured he'd better do something more than make his daily routine phone call. Lucy was getting mean. He could tell.

A second later, Shayne glanced up, and Circus Joe flitted out of the Store. He held his black cloak firmly anchored in the crook of his left arm. As usual Joe turned and walked South.

No Cadillac was in sight. Shayne had not spotted Joe's in the whole area. Joe walked sedately down the street. Every now and then, Joe would stop and study something in a window, but Shayne knew per-

fectly well he was checking for a tail.

If anything Joe was more alert than ever. He studied the street, the sidewalks, the buildings. He missed nothing. When Joe was still fifty yards back, Shayne pulled out from the curb and swung into the extreme inside lane. If he were right, he knew Joe would cut across the street at the corner, and then continue left. Just as the light turned green, Shayne swung over and made his turn.

Joe flitted along in Shayne's rearview mirror. Shayne kept his eye on him, But Joe didn't notice the car ahead. He was too intent on anything that might be behind him. All of his training had been given to protecting his own rear.

There was a black Cadillac five blocks from the Store. Circus Joe got into it. Shayne continued to eye him from his up front tail. In essence, Shayne had only one thing going for him now. He figured Circus Joe would head for the area near the Miami river. He was right. Five minutes later, Joe pulled up in front of a concrete warehouse. A huge padlock secured the main delivery entrance, but Joe ran up a flight of steps to a side door. He entered. Shayne guessed he had gone into some office.

Shayne pulled up and parked well back from the warehouse. He knew where Joe lived. He didn't have to follow him home.

A sign said the warehouse belonged to The Trader Ted Trading Corporation. The concrete was painted orange and well cared for. It stood out in gaudy contrast to some of the more decrepit buildings which dotted the area.

Shayne tried to visualize what was happening inside. Was Joe working with a regular fence? Or was it somebody else?

Half an hour later, Joe ran down the steps, hopped into his Cad and took off without a glance in any direction. Whatever he had been carrying was long gone. He was now home free.

X

THE RENTAL reeked of cigar smoke, and Shayne didn't like the excessive play in the wheel either. The dark warehouse posed an uncertain challenge. What was Joe's pay off? The warehouse stood four stories high. On the right hand side, a giant bill board crossed over a low building which housed an auto repair shop. One light bulb, on a curved standard, cast a cone of illumination over a rusty metal door. It was padlocked. The billboard showed a long curved female body, mostly nude.

Shayne toyed with an idea.

Perhaps the fence was still there. With the fence under his control, Shayne figured he might be able to pin the pieces of his

puzzle together. It didn't take him more than five minutes to make up his mind. He crossed over, walked up the steps, tried the door. It was locked. He put his ear to the door. There was no sound from the inside.

He hurried back down the steps and circled along the side of the building. In the back there was a small parking area with no vehicles on it, and far up there were four windows. The windows were large and wide, but they were all dark. Shayne saw that none of them were open, and he wondered where the fence had gone. He could also see no visible metal alarm strips.

Shayne returned to the side door and considered it carefully for several seconds. In his long career, he had come up against locked doors before. For such cases he carried in his tool kit a plastic insert coated with was. It took a second to make an impression. It took seconds more to fashion a key. He thought it would work.

It did.

Shayne probed his penlight into the darkness. Moving slowly, he passed in through a series of offices. The first three were dusty, full of bundles of papers, and obviously very little used. The fourth one, backing onto the windows, had a big desk, and a wall filled with green filing cabinets. There was an ashtray on the

desk. Two cigarettes were stuffed out in the glass bowl. They felt warm. Shayne figured Joe had met his fence. They had talked business. They had gone. But where had the fence gone? Shayne found nothing in the desk of importance. There were envelopes and stationary with the Grand Miami letterhead. There was a .45 in the right hand drawer. Shayne didn't touch it.

To the right of the desk, there was another door which led down into the warehouse proper. The warehouse was dark. Shayne looked around cautiously. One level was devoted to furs and ready-to-wear. Another level to Cosmetics.

The merchandise in the warehouse must have totalled in the neighborhood of three quarters of a million dollars. Obviously, Joe had not stolen all of it. Shayne poked at a few things, and then feeling disgusted with himself he started back up the inner stairs.

He had not turned on any lights. He had used only his penlight. He had not heard a sound. He walked into the same office. It was empty. He glanced out the windows and noted the black oily surface of the Miami river. Nothing moved.

Shayne reached out for the doorknob leading back through the series of empty offices.

He was stung.

Something very like a bee sting had struck him in the back. Shayne whirled around. Nobody was in the room. He fumbled quickly. He twisted his right arm up and felt up and along his back. He grabbed. His fingers came away with something that looked like a hollow plastic dart. But it wasn't a dart.

Even as Shayne fumbled with it, the room, the green filing cabinets, the desk, the ashtray, all started to spin in a fast revolving whirlpool. The pool became an ocean of mud. Shayne tumbled head first into the mud.

A few centuries later, Shayne felt something slapping his cheek. He opened his eyes. It was a hand. The hand was attached to a blue sleeve. He was staring up into the face of a cop.

"OK, Bud, on your feet. You're charged with Breaking and Entering."

"Get me a glass of water."

Another face came over and peered down at him. The faces were unfamiliar. He had never seen them in his life, but he didn't know all the cops on the force either. After a bit of hesitation, the second cop went over and brought him a paper cup from the water cooler.

"Here."

After drinking it, Shayne felt the floor, the room, the whole world sink into something vaguely familiar. What bothered him most was he had let the fence, whoever

the fence was, play games with him.

"Did you look in my wallet?"

"Yeah. And?"

"Didn't you see my ID. My license? Michael Shayne?"

"Means nothing to us."

"Great."

"Come on, Bud. Up! We're going for a little ride. My buddy, Stan, here, drives real nice. You'll like your trip, Mr. Shayne. Even better is the man at the desk. Now, his name is Sergeant Kenner. He's a gem. You'll love him."

"Can I make a phone call?"

"No."

"You have to read me my rights. You do know that, don't you?"

"We've read you your rights. Don't you remember? You agreed to every one of them. Come on!"

"Where's the poison dart?"

"What dart?"

Shayne rubbed his neck. Some circulation was coming back. He stood up, but tottered feebly back and forth. It was a few seconds before he could take a step. "You cops familiar with Will Gentry?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"I want to talk to him."

"Forget it, Mister. He hates Breaking and Entering. It's driven him crazy. There's so much of it in Miami, he could publish an encyclopedia on it."

"How'd you get here, anyway?"

"You touched off the alarm system. Knocked yourself out. And that's all she wrote! Come on!"

Two hours later, Shayne sat at the desk where Will Gentry leaned his big elbows. Will licked his lips several times. His fingernails seemed to occupy him considerably, and his cigar was going like a chimney.

"Mike, I shouldn't let you get away with this. You're a grown man. Twenty-one and all that, but you just can't go breaking into a big operation. Not like that. It's one of the warehouses for the Grand Miami. Very much on the up and up. Don't tell me Circus Joe led you there."

"He did."

"I don't believe it. And what's more it's costing me plenty to keep this thing hushed up. Mr. Vellos wants to prosecute. Fortunately I was able to persuade him that what he gained in bad publicity wouldn't be worth it. Took a lot of doing to make him agree. But, Mike, listen . . ."

"Yeah."

"I want you to knock it off. I want you to leave Mr. Vellos alone. And I want you to leave him alone for good. OK? Got that?"

Shayne said nothing. He thanked Will. He rode the elevator down to the ground floor, and he went out and called a cab. Since Lucy hadn't seen him in days, he headed for the office.

XI

SHAYNE BANGED into his office. He was tired, angry, frustrated. Lucy was waiting for him. With the Grand Miami case driving him nuts, he wasn't entirely sure how he was going to react to her calm and tender voice.

"Michael, what happened? You're a mess."

Her clear gaze penetrated him.

"Angel, you got it all wrong. Don't pick on me. Did you ever hear of a store that robs itself?"

"Does what?" Lucy stood up straight and reached for him. "Why haven't you been in? You've got a stack of calls."

Mike sank into the chair behind his desk and didn't even look at the notes on the spindle. "You can't even get in to see the manager. Fred Vellos! Where murders are part of their stock in trade."

"Surely, Michael, you're exaggerating."

"I wish I were. First Gene gets killed, then Circus Joe steals from the store. Then he takes it back to the store. What the hell?"

"And you can't touch Fred Vellos?"

"That's what Will Gentry says. And Will is *never* wrong. Or is he?" Sarcasm hung thick in his voice.

"What did you do—rob a bank?"

"No. What can you find out about Circus Joe? What's he been doing the last few months? I need . . ."

"You need a drink." She moved around his desk. "I'll make it for you."

Shayne shoved back in his chair, felt the hard wooden edge slap up under his knees. Lucy was busy pulling a bottle of cognac out of the second drawer of his filing cabinet. She placed the bottle, a glass, and two small white tablets on his desk.

"What's that?"

"Aspirin. Michael, you've got a headache. I can tell."

"I'm not taking any."

"Oh, yes, you are."

He swallowed the aspirin, gulped the water, then slowly sipped his cognac. Nothing could cut the cobwebs like that smooth brown fluid. He swirled it in his glass. After a couple of minutes, he felt better.

With Lucy there, with his desk uncluttered except for the phone-call memos, with the phone not ringing, he almost felt human.

"Michael?"

Something in her voice made him look up.

"Who is Valery?"

"Huh?"

"Michael, please. You heard me. Tim was telling me about her. How interested she is in you. Things like that? Who is she?"

"Well, she's a client."

"She's not a client. When some dame wants to know your size in boxer shorts, I want to know about it. Michael . . .?"

"Yeah?"

"What size do you wear?"

"Thirty-eight."

Michael!"

Shayne poured another belt of cognac, drank it, then stared at the phone. He didn't look at Lucy. "Angel, you got me all wrong: She happens to be part of the case. I don't know how yet, but slowly I'm finding out. There's something funny going on between her and Circus Joe. I've got to find out what."

Lucy perched on the corner of his desk just as there was a knock on the outer door. She turned, looked at him with a question mark in her eyes. Shayne shrugged. The knocking kept on and on, getting more and more violent, as if somebody were determined to get in.

"Okay, Angel," he said. "Better go see who it is. They'll break the door down if you don't."

A minute later she escorted in Len Sturgis, Miami Chief of Homicide. Len said, "Thought I'd better drop by. Will has been kind of worried about you."

"Drink?" Shayne tilted the bottle.

"No, thanks. I only came over because Will asked me to. What worries him the most is that you stay put." —Len swung around and gave Lucy a fatherly glance. "Now, you, Miss Hamilton, I might ask you as a favor. Please make kindly sure your boss doesn't move from this office. Not

so much as one single inch."

Lucy's voice flowed out smooth as corn syrup. "Mr. Sturgis, you've got yourself a deal. I'll be only too happy to oblige. You can count on it. I think I may even truck his supper in to him."

"Len, you done?"

Len shrugged carelessly, smiled and swept out.

Shayne watched the door close, glanced up at Lucy. He moved to lift the phone, thought better of it, put it down. He reached for his bottle, kicked back from his desk. That's when the phone rang.

"Yes, Miss Ingram, I hear you."

"Mr. Shayne, it's Valery. She's running off with Circus Joe and she's going to marry him."

"She's what?"

"Eloped—that's what she said. Didn't take any of her things with her. No suitcase—no clothes—nothing. While I was still there at the store, before I came home. She called me then and told me all about it. Joe was picking her up. Said he'd be along in his Cadillac. That was an hour ago."

"Any idea where they might be headed?"

Jill sighed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne. "I don't know."

"You sure she meant it?"

"I believe it. A week ago, I wouldn't have. But things have changed. She's hooked on that man. *Hooked!*"

"Why do you say *hooked?*"

Jill fumbled with her words.

"Like, you know"—she sorted out her words—"on drugs. Something like that. Maybe I'm wrong. But she went around kind of glassy-eyed. In the morning, she would stare for an hour into the mirror, not doing a thing. Circus Joe? I never could stand that man."

"How the hell could she be attracted to him then?"

Jill remained silent. A minute later she was gushing like a geyser. "What can I say? Happens every day I guess. Valery went loco over him. Maybe he fed her something, or gave her something to drink. One thing sure, she's gone off the deep end..."

"Okay," Shayne said, "I'll look around."

He hung up and stared thoughtfully at Lucy. "What would you say to a night on the town?"

Lucy wrinkled her nose. "I would say you were a total louse. Valery? *Hah!*"

"It wasn't Valery."

"Yeah, so it was her buddy, Jill Ingram. Where we going?"

"A fancy dive. Real top grade. All the way! You'll love it. And by the way, Angel, it's right out of *Star Wars.*"

"Out of where?"

"Forget it!"

XII

LUCY WAS NOT as surprised by Space Splash's outlandish decor as

Shayne thought she might be. She ordered red snapper. He ordered steak. Shayne's instinct that Valery might be there had not proven correct. She was not. Neither was Circus Joe.

When they were well into their dessert, Shayne caught Lucy staring wide-eyed over his right shoulder. Shayne had not realized there was another entrance, to the far right of the bar. Through it came Valery, followed by Circus Joe.

"Michael, she's a witch. Stay away from her."

Shayne took a quick look, then went back to his peach cobbler. "Angel, you're jealous."

"Hah!"

"What do you think of Circus Joe?"

Lucy pursed her lips. "Well, not knowing the man, I would say he makes a very fine picture. Dignified. Grey hair. Fine profile. Good chin. What more do you want? How many jobs do you suppose he's pulled since he went pro?"

Shayne sipped his coffee. "In the thousands. He did time in Louisiana — Texas — New York State. Now he drives a big Cad, and he's got a charming young girl by the snout."

"Ah, Michael." Lucy rolled up her napkin and leaned towards him. "They're coming this way. They'll be sitting at the next table."

Within seconds, Circus Joe leaned over and pulled out a chair

for Valery. Valery sat facing Shayne, but didn't even glance at him. Circus Joe sat with his back to Shayne. He seemed to be totally unaware of Shayne's presence.

"Drinks?" The cocktail waitress came up in her metallic pants and leaned over Joe. "The Special?"

"Yeah," Joe muttered. "The Special."

Joe didn't look at Valery. When the Space Splash Special came, Joe clinked his glass with Valery's. "Here's to us, Sugar. May we go a long way."

Valery ordered crab. Joe ordered filet of sole. During their dinner, they totally ignored Shayne and Lucy. Shayne sat there, nursing a Coffee Royale, wondering what made those two tick. It didn't make sense.

After their dinner, Circus Joe ordered two coffees, a Black Russian for himself and green Chartreuse for Valery. Shayne watched her sip it with her long white fingers anchored delicately to the glass. Valery seemed intent on Joe only.

"Hey, *Michael!*"

Shayne winced and drew back his ankle. Lucy had given him such a swift kick, he had not been prepared at all. When he turned behind him to look, he was amazed to see Fred Vellos coming down the passageway.

Vellos wore an open white sports jacket, a black shirt, tight white pants, white shoes. His disco garb made him look even

younger than his 35 years. He wore dark glasses, and his hands were held stiffly in front of him.

Tim had reported to Shayne that Fred Vellos went out very little. He went to one restaurant, one bar. They were both exclusive—members only.

Lucy tightened her lips. "What's he going to do, Michael?"

Shayne didn't want to stare, but he had the feeling Vellos was coming toward their table. Vellos didn't stop. He stopped two feet behind Valery's chair and placed his hands on Valery's shoulders.

"Miss Hudson, you are out of line—totally out of line! You don't belong here."

Circus Joe swung easily to his feet and stood facing Vellos. "Leave her *alone!*"

Vellos lifted his eyes, from the top of the table to Circus Joe's belt, then on up to Joe's face. Vellos didn't say one word. Under Vellos's glacier stare, Joe turned pale, then swayed slightly back, not far, only an inch or so.

"Get *out!*" Valery ripped a knife off the table and jumped towards Vellos. "Out! What we do is our business."

Vellos calmly took the knife away from her. He pressed his fingers into her shoulders, forcing her down into her chair. Twisting away, Valery fought free of his hands. An instant later, with a sudden catlike movement, she raked her fingernails down over

Vellos's face. It was so sudden Vellos couldn't stop her.

Blood welled from two long scratches and dripped onto his white coat. Vellos said nothing. He opened his hand and slapped her across the mouth. Valery sat down and began to sob.

Circus Joe moved slowly around the table, coming for Vellos, but never got to him. Vellos took a sudden sidestep, broke that off into a tight whirl. Somewhere in the center of his spin, he thrust out his right hand with his fingers held rigid and stiff. They caught Joe in the diaphragm.

Joe gasped, then sat down. He clasped his stomach and retched. For a moment, he seemed to struggle to overcome that blow. It didn't work. He folded. His head rolled on the table. He was out.

Shayne shoved his chair back, to say something to Vellos. Vellos brushed past him, stopped three yards away, and then Shayne felt the cold stare cutting through him.

Valery moaned behind him. Shayne reached for her and lifted her to her feet. "Come on," he said, "You're coming with us."

"Michael!" Lucy looked daggers at him.

"Angel, I'm sorry . . ."

"I'm not going with you. I'm getting a cab."

Shayne stared at Lucy's back and watched her walk out. But he had to get Valery home and to bed, before she collapsed. She was

totalled out.

"Come on!"

Subdued now, Valery followed him obediently. Shayne got her into his car and then home. When they got inside the apartment, they found a note from Jill.

In case . . . I had to go back to the store. I forgot something for Mr. Vellos. I had to go and get it. Be home in a couple of hours.

Shayne didn't make any sense out of it. He and Valery were alone.

He tried to get Valery to relax. She shivered uncontrollably. He found a sweater, wrapped it around her. Her body went tense. For several long minutes, Shayne found nothing to say to her. She was too strange, too far off. But then, suddenly, she seemed to warm up and glow.

"Shayne." Valery reached for him.

"Yeah?"

The phone rang. It was Tim.

"How the hell did you know I was here?"

"I guessed. I got a bit of news. Vellos was out at the airport. He caught a plane for Dallas."

"When?"

"An hour ago."

"You're sure."

"Yes, Mike, sure as rain."

While Mike was on the phone, Valery had been in the bath. When she came out, her face was wiped clean of makeup. She wore a soft cotton robe. It was white. Her hair looked blacker than ever. The

robe's belt was pulled tightly around her waist. Her eyes had a thirsty look.

"Shayne . . ."

He smelled her perfume. He felt as if he could never climb out of its deep, ominous pit, yet Valery attracted him. He leaned over her.

Valery's long white hands caught his head. Her fingers dug into the rough stubble of his hair. As if immensely thirsty, she opened her lips. She gave way under his kiss, then shoved her fists up tight against his chin.

"Mike, you're rough."

"Yeah."

"You don't like Circus Joe?"

"No."

"What about Vellos?"

Shayne hesitated. He peered into a storm of gold points which swam in the very depths of her eyes. She pressed herself close.

"Vellos is different," Shayne said. "He's a killer. I think he killed my friend. But I can't prove it—not yet. I can't even go near him. The Chief of Police told me to stay away."

"Then"—Valery's lips burned like fire—"maybe he'll come to you."

"Maybe."

XIII

SHAYNE GROUNDED his right fist into his own jaw and reflected on the vagaries of life. First she hated him, then she loved him. Nothing about the Grand Miami Case made

any sense.

When he left her, Shayne swung past the Trader Ted's Trading Corporation Warehouse near the river. His suspicions were triggered by something Joe had said. Why wasn't there a night watchman? Why was the building vulnerable? Shayne determined to check.

He paused, however, when he thought of Will Gentry, and Gentry's snide remarks.

Shayne pulled up across from the Warehouse. The street was dead. At first, his careful scan revealed nothing, but then he noticed the Cadillac. Joe had pulled it into a dark shadow under the big Avocado tree at the far end of the billboard. If it hadn't been for the faint shine of chrome, Shayne might not have noticed it.

Shayne felt a cold prickle at the back of his neck. He lowered his window and listened. The night told him nothing. But where was Circus Joe? What was he doing there so late? It was three in the morning. The street was silent. The warehouse was silent.

Shayne got out. His shoes made grating sounds on the concrete. The silence continued. Shayne quietly climbed the steps to the side door. He tried the door. The door was unlocked. With his tactile sense magnified, he felt an icy chill creep further and further up his neck. He loosened his .45.

He gently, very gently, opened the door.

He expected a blow, a shot. Neither came. The first office was empty. A faint odor of *La morte douce et triste* wafted through the hot sultry air.

Where was Joe?

The first three offices gave no answer. They were as empty as before. Shayne stopped and listened. There was no sound. He could hear his own intake of breath, and a faint sound of traffic from far off, perhaps on the other side of the river.

The door to the fourth office was closed. He turned the knob. The door was not locked, but he couldn't open it. Making a final decision to get into that office, Shayne put his shoulder to the door and shoved. Little by little, he got it open.

The reason for his struggle was self evident. Circus Joe had fallen against the door, and his body had stiffened and locked into a wedge. He was very dead.

Joe's shirtfront was still spotlessly white, except for one dark spot. Blood had widened out into a circle four inches in diameter. Joe's head was twisted up and over his right shoulder, and he stared at his desk. He saw nothing.

Shayne didn't touch him.

The office was much as Shayne had seen it last. The ashtray was clean. There were no cigarettes in it. There was a faint whiff of cordite. Taking his time, missing nothing, Shayne stepped around

the office. The windows were locked.

Obviously there was no way of getting in and out except for the door to the warehouse proper. He tried that. The warehouse was dark and silent, and Shayne knew that the padlock hung on the big door on the outside.

He eased his .45 back into his shoulder holster. There was no other way into the room that he could see. So how had the killer escaped? How had he got in?

Vellos must have spent some time there. Shayne wondered about that. So he was on his way to Dallas. Shayne made a quick excursion through the warehouse, but found nothing. No drugged darts flew at him. He was alone.

He came back and stared down at the bullet hole. He went to the desk. The forty-five was still in the drawer. Using a handkerchief, Shayne lifted it out and smelled the barrel. It had been recently fired. No question about the death weapon. He had found it. But who had used it?

As to why it had been used, Shayne was perfectly certain he knew the answer. Circus Joe had been silenced for good. Whatever hope Shayne had entertained about pumping Joe for information was gone.

Shayne knew he had something to do, but he hesitated about doing it. He had to make a phone call, and he hated to touch that phone, but finally he did.

He dialed Will Gentry at home. "Will, I've got a new one for you."

Shayne could hear Will's sharp, harsh breathing. "Mike, you know what time it is? You got to be kidding! Okay, tell me! It better be good. Where are you?"

Shayne explained.

Some eleven minutes later, Will arrived with a full squad and took over. His boys made a meticulous search of the building. They found nothing. There was no sign of how the killer could have got away.

Will sat behind the Warehouse desk and studied the corpse. Then he looked at Shayne. Then he looked at the .45. There was a full group of lab boys powdering and dusting and making chalk lines. A strobe light popped. A photographer took one more picture.

The medical examiner joked with Len Sturgis.

"Bet it was done with a BB Gun."

"Oh, sure!"

Will glanced again at Shayne. "Mike, no ideas?"

"None."

"Well, now, what's the matter? Private eyeing not paying off? What are you so sore about? I know you too well. Spit it out!"

"I had me a good idea. But it flew out of town. Went to Dallas."

"Vellos?"

"Yeah."

"You didn't listen to me, did you? I told you that old boy wasn't a good idea. And why would he

want to kill Circus Joe? *Why?*"

"If I knew why, I wouldn't be . . ." Shayne crossed to the window and stared out at the dark oily river. Something white drifted past. For a second, he imagined it was a face. "Will? Can you put a lid on this for twenty-four hours?"

"I might. What's on your mind?"

"The killer, whoever he is, will be waiting to see what's on TV or in the papers. If he sees nothing, then he'll begin to wonder. Maybe he'll come back to look."

Will chewed his cigar. He clenched his grim jaw, then set his lips tight and hard. "I'll arrange a stake-out. Only my best boys. Maybe for twenty-four hours it's not such a bad idea at that. Meanwhile, in the morgue . . ."

Shayne nodded his head at the corpse. "Circus Joe won't mind a bit."

He thanked Will. Feeling time was running out, he returned to his apartment. He wanted to call Tim and ask him some questions, but he didn't want to wake him up. He wanted to call Lucy, but he didn't dare. For a second, he toyed with the idea of calling Valery, but he knew this was not the time.

Shayne sat in his chair and thumbed through his black address book. He wasn't looking for any particular name. He wasn't looking for any particular number. He stared at the door. He tried to shape the puzzle together in his mind.

How could anybody have got out of that warehouse? The warehouse door was padlocked. Circus Joe's body blocked the inner door. The windows were locked and bolted from the inside.

How?

Even if Vello had been there? Which, according to all the reports received, he was not. How could Vello have done it? An idea drifted around in Shayne's head. It kept coming apart. It hung like a strand of cigarette smoke in the air of an empty building. It came apart, reformed, drifted into nothingness.

Once again, Shayne dived for his little black book. On many occasions, he had called on "Peanut" P. Dexter for information. Peanut was an original oddball. He was a big contractor, and a big promoter, and he had gone through dozens of big developments. Peanut had a real talent for big jobs. He took them, and he never made any real money off them.

"Why bother? It's the job that matters."

That was Peanut's philosophy.

Shayne glanced at his watch. It was six-thirty in the morning. Sunday. Peanut might or might not be up. Shayne gave Peanut a call. "Ever hear of Fred Vello?"

Peanut snorted, yawned, cursed. "Jesus, Shayne! What's bugging you? I haven't slept in weeks. Got a big job out near the Airport. What goddamn time is it?"

Oh, Yeah! Whatcha want?"

"I thought you might know Vellos. Maybe you've even done a job for him."

"Okay, okay." Peanut sounded hurt. "So I did a job for him. So what? So I helped put in that elevator which runs in back of the Grand Miami. So what is that to you, Shayne?"

"Never did anything for him over at that warehouse of his on the river?"

"Naw. Why?"

"You know anybody who might have? You know all the jobs that are going on. You might have heard."

"I can ask around. When you want me to call you?"

"Soon."

Shayne thanked Peanut and hung up. If Peanut had done the elevator, he must have been aware of what a total waste it was for the store. But Peanut had not said anything about that. He did think Vellos was a tad strange.

"Okay, Shayne, maybe a tad and a half."

Shayne was making a pot of coffee when the phone rang. This time it was Tim. Tim seemed to be half-asleep, but a bright jubilant note rang in his voice.

"Couldn't get a hook on anything—not for the longest time. For most everybody in journalism, Vellos is nothing. Not newsworthy you might call him. Clean."

"Then a friend of mine, who happens to be up in Missoula, Montana on a Vacation Land piece, happened to phone. He had come across something by accident. Word was Vellos was doing a laundry. I asked what the hell he meant. And he said, 'Well, probably more of a laundering.' You know the phrase, don't you, Mike?"

"Yeah."

"So Vellos has some dirty money. He's making it clean. But not the usual way. He's doing his own thing—buying stores, building them up. That would partly explain his dumping money in the till. Selling them. At the same time, he's coming out with one big nice round heap of cold cash."

Shayne had his fingers on something real for the first time since the case started. "How'd the money get dirty?"

"Word has it, there's some kind of connection between Vellos and some dirty work back in California. Back in Marin County. Did you ever hear of the Marin Murders—all the peddlers who got blasted in one night?"

"Nobody could find out who did it. The guess was, their supplier finally totalled them out. That was back in the sixties. A little coke here—a little horse there."

"Why do you say Vellos?"

"It's only a glimmer. There was only one clue. Night those men died, there was a black van seen running around. Mike, hey! You

haven't spotted a black van, have you?"

"Matter of fact, I have."

"Know who owns it?"

"No."

Tim clucked his tongue thoughtfully. "Hope you know what you're doing. I don't want you to wake up with a belly full of lead."

"Supposedly, Vellos is in Dallas?"

"Supposedly, yes. But he's due back this afternoon at four. Why don't you get some sleep? By the way, I heard about Circus Joe."

"And Gentry swore he would hush it up."

"He did. That's why I heard."

"Tim? Could you do one more job for me? Find out if there's any way of being in Dallas? And not being in Dallas? If you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean."

"Tim, one more thing. How many did he kill?"

"Seven."

XIV

THE SCENT WAS *La morte douce et triste*. Shayne had been smelling it for hours. For hours he had crouched in the narrow round pit in the middle of cosmetics waiting for something to happen. He had played all of his cards right.

He had been at the airport. Vellos got off the four o'clock plane. He drove off in his red Porsche. Vellos had not seen

Shayne. Vellos was carrying a black attache case. Nothing else.

It was three in the morning. It had been a long day, a long night. The store had closed early. Tim would be asleep. Lucy might still be reading one of her paperbacks. No doubt, Valery was tossing, and turning, sleepless, wondering.

Thinking of Valery made him remember his conversation with her at noon. It wasn't easy dragging the truth out of her, but she had talked.

"The first time, Mike," she had said, "It wasn't much. In Cosmetics, there's always breakage. Write-offs, we call them. The store gives them to the clerks. Or they are destroyed. Once, we dropped this ounce of Chanel. I patched up the little flask and put it in my purse.

"On the fifth floor, we have a place for coffee breaks. I was sitting there, reading a book, smoking. My purse was open. Vellos came past and reached in and took out the perfume. He gave me hell for it. He asked me if I wanted to be fired. I couldn't explain. He wouldn't let me."

Shayne had asked her to go on.

"Then, a week ago, he came into the Department and asked to see my purse. We keep them in the Department. I reached for the drawer, but he beat me to it. In my purse, was a diamond wristwatch in a store box. He told me he was going to call Security. I tried to argue with him . . ."

"And he asked you to repay him if he kept it quiet?"

"Yes. That's when he made me go and check on you. First with Mr. Tim Rourke. Then outside your place."

Shayne remembered his night with Valery. She still left him thirsty, still feeling sharp twinges of desire.

Will Gentry would not like his being in the store. Will would probably lock him up for sure in the Dade County Jail. But Will didn't know. Not yet anyway.

Shayne's idea of staying in the store had come from Gene. Gene had explained how, even with the electronic alarm system, it was still simple for a man or a woman to hide in the store and stay after closing. Gene had shown him the best place. Gene had also shown him how to turn off the alarm system, down near his own office.

Being Sunday, the store had closed at six. After a couple of hours, Shayne came out of the men's room and searched through the store. He did it carefully, from top to bottom. The store was empty. He then searched for the right place to wait.

He found it on the first floor, in cosmetics. There he had a clear field of fire. He listened. He heard nothing. There were no lights. There was nothing to hear. The store was dead. No sound came from the electrical system nor from the air conditioning.

Shayne thumbed his wallet.

Credit cards, ID, an old photo. Shayne's .45 felt cold, sticky, as if he had dropped it in the middle of a dark swamp. He could smell rotten mud, decayed plants, but it was not swamp decay he smelled, it was perfume.

La morte douce et triste.

A faint breeze agitated the silent air, but it was not a breeze. It was no wind. Shayne didn't know what it was. He heard nothing.

He felt chilled.

For a few minutes, while he crouched, he remembered other stakeouts, other dark interiors. But this one was different. Here, the deadly smell would not go away.

He thought of Valery.
Would she be asleep?

Her attraction for Circus Joe had been morbid and sick. She had admitted that too. She had tried to explain. "Mike, he came to me. He made me an offer. I knew his offer was disgusting." She hesitated.

"Maybe, that was part of his attraction. I remember once being in the woods back in Wisconsin. It was summer. I had on a white dress. I was all white, pure, like snow from head to foot. Even my shoes were white. I had been with a friend. But he disgusted me.

"I was near this mud pool. Black gooey forest mud. I don't know what made the mud. Some trucks, perhaps. Lumber people had been working there. Totally

black. I stood there looking down. I couldn't help it. I threw myself in. Really, I guess, that's what happened between me and Circus Joe."

Shayne had not known how long he would have to wait. He was prepared to wait all night. Shayne had been sure Vellos would go and check his apartment. Shayne had known. Vellos would be alert to his movements. If he ran out of all other possibilities, then Vellos would put two and two together. Shayne would be in the Grand Miami waiting for Vellos.

Vellos would act then.

That would be his chance finally to wipe out every last trace of trouble. Shayne knew without a doubt Vellos would come. He only wondered when. He crouched, flexed his knees, felt pain from old wounds. His finger stroked the trigger.

The phone rang. Shayne moved his head up a few inches. It was a small white phone, sitting on a small crescent moon counter. The phone seemed almost too small to be of any real use. The counter was too small. It was nothing more than a decorative touch.

Shayne listened. The phone made a shrill, demanding sound. It wouldn't stop. It rang for five minutes. When it did stop, Shayne heaved a great sigh of relief.

He had known the store was on a Centrex system. Why, however, would any customer be calling after store closing? Could it have

been Tim? Or maybe Valery? But who knew he was in the Store? He had told nobody. He was waiting for one man.

Would Vellos have called?

Again the white phone rang. It drilled at tiny nerves behind Shayne's right ear. Shayne considered moving from his pit.

Suddenly, from the direction of Furs, a metallic chattering started. It was strident, sharp, eerie. It sounded like a nail being scratched on glass. Shayne raised himself up and peered into the far shadows. There was nothing to see.

Grasping his .45 firmly, Shayne started crawling towards the sound. At the time, it seemed like a good idea. But it didn't seem like such a good idea a second later. Lights flashed on. They blasted up full bore through the glass floor. They blinded Shayne.

XV

HE KNEW HE was pinned like a black bug to a white cloth. At that second, the shot came. A bullet struck his .45 and sent it spinning across the glass floor. The shooter was good. Too damn good!

Shayne tensed, waited. He knew what he was waiting for. He didn't know when it would come. Skin along his neck crawled. His throat went dry. Giving his head a slight twist, he tried to look up into the upper shadows. A bullet brushed through the red stiff

hair on the side of his head.

"Shoot, you bastard!" Shayne shouted. "Go ahead and shoot!"

There was no answer. Nobody shot.

"Vellos!"

No answer.

"I know it's you."

With a sudden surge of energy, Shayne jumped to his feet. He was alive. But now more than ever, he could feel the threat. It surged through the air. It was viable. He could touch it with his fingers. But he could not see it. Above him and behind him was the killer. Shayne blinked. Cosmetics danced with the purple pulse of neon.

"Shayne!"

The voice purred. It was soft, controlled, immensely cold. Behind the voice stood a man with an immense reservoir of cold nerve. He was silent. He had uttered only one word. Shayne turned. Before he finished his turn, a bullet snapped past his ear.

It spattered across the glass floor and ricocheted, smashing into the giant glass case. The black flacon fell. Within seconds, a sweet deadly scent drifted in waves across the floor.

"Okay, Vellos, when are you going to stop playing with me?"

Vellos made no answer. Shayne tried to plot Vellos' position. He knew Vellos was behind him, to his left, and maybe a floor or two higher. Somewhere in the inner dome. Shayne knew there was no way he could get to him.

"Shayne?"

"Yeah?"

"You would have been wise to forget it. Forget all of it. Circus Joe should have convinced you."

"Vellos, why are you bothering? The Chief of Police will figure this out. He knows about you, Vellos —all about you."

"He doesn't know a thing."

"He has an indictment."

Fred Vellos said nothing. Shayne waited for something to happen. Nothing did happen. All of a sudden, he thought he heard a woman's quick, hysterical sob. He wasn't sure. It could have been something wrong with the plumbing. He didn't hear it again.

Shayne tensed. He plotted, diving for his gun, swinging, aiming. He knew he would never make it. The sob came again. It was closer this time. Near him. But he didn't dare turn around.

"Vellos, Gentry has all my records. He'll get you for sure."

"Forget it, Shayne. Nobody knows. That's why I'm alive. That's why I am what I am. That's why my money is clean. I cleaned it. I cleaned it the hard way. Nobody knows. Those who did know . . ."

Now, Shayne could hear a quick sobbing breath right at his shoulder. When he turned, Valery Hudson fell into his arms.

"You?"

"He made me come."

"You're not part of it?"

"No."

From above them, Vellos spoke with new coldness, new reassurance. "Shayne, they're dead. All dead!"

"Oh, Mike," Valery sobbed. "I was out there, watching. He caught me. He brought me along. I had heard he had a secret elevator to the top floor of the building. Direct into his office. He took me up in that. His black van is parked outside. Nobody knows about the van. Mike, what is he going to do?"

"Go ahead, Shayne, tell her!" Vellos spoke coldly. "Tell her!"

Shayne felt Valery's quick breath. Her tears gave a wet sheen to her face. Her hands pawed him. They were like small animals, uncontrolled, nervous.

"Shayne," Vellos purred. "Why don't you tell her? Scared? I'm going to kill you both."

La morte douce et triste was thick in Shayne's throat. Valery's nails dug into his arm. She caught his head and pulled him down to her. Her whisper sounded fragmented, unreal. "He didn't want you digging. Not into his past. You . . . were too close."

Behind them, the white phone rang. Valery jumped. Vellos told Shayne not to touch it. The phone rang for almost three minutes.

"Mike," Valery asked, "Do you know who it is?"

"No, but I could guess."

"Tim?"

"Yeah."

"Please, Mike," she whisper-

ed, "I don't want to die. I don't want him to kill us. Can't you do something?"

"There's no time."

That was his main problem. There was no time. Nobody but Vellos knew they were in the Store. Maybe Tim had made a long-shot guess. Maybe Tim could send help, but Shayne couldn't count on it. If they were both found dead, Shayne was sure Vellos' story would stick. They had broken into the Store. Valery had shot Shayne. Or Shayne had shot Valery. Nobody could prove a thing.

Shayne knew he had to act now. "Vellos?"

He didn't expect him to answer, but he did.

"Shayne, strange how your girl reacts. She's scared! I like them better when they're scared."

"There is one thing," Shayne said. "A photo. Tying you to those killings in California. In Marin! Your black van. I have the photo."

"Huh?"

Suspicion, doubt entered Vellos' voice. Unthinkingly he had snapped out an exclamation instead of a word. Up to this point, he had controlled himself well. Shayne waited, hoping his bait might take. "I've got the photo in my wallet. After you shoot me, you'd better get rid of it."

"What do you know about Marin?"

"Everything."

"Nobody knows."

"I know."

"Shayne, don't move! I've gotten shots in this gun. It'll only take two."

Shayne was hoping Vellos would have to leave his perch, take an elevator, find a stair. Vellos did neither. A sudden swish of air, a clunk, and Fred Vellos stood behind them. He had swung down on a rope.

"Surprised? You shouldn't be, Shayne. I grew up in a circus family in Canada. One reason why I liked Circus Joe."

"But you killed him."

"Yes."

"And Gene, and how many others?"

"The photo! I know you're lying Shayne, but I have to make absolutely sure!"

Shayne had not hoped for a chance. He had no concealed weapon. He had his wallet on his hip, and he had nothing else. In his wallet were his license, his money, one photo. It was an old photo taken years before of a Model-A Ford.

Shayne didn't even know why he had kept it—but the Model A struck had his fancy. It was something with memories of the past. He had heard the Ford once belonged to Dutch Schulz, when Dutch made his famous long booze runs from Montreal to Manhattan.

Valery's eyes were immense. Her face was dry, hot, with a look of scorched sand. A ridge above her eyes was white. No color

showed in he head, neck, shoulders.

Vellos stepped back from Shayne, leveling his rifle.

"The photo—now!"

Shayne pulled out his wallet. Vellos smiled, anticipating. Shayne fumbled. Vellos was still smiling, still tense. Shayne had expected a bullet. But it didn't come.

Deliberately, Shayne flicked through his cards. He found the photo of the Ford and held it out towards Vellos. In his eagerness, Vellos swayed forward an inch, focussing his attention on the photo. He was trying to see it more clearly. He held the rifle in his right hand. With his left, he reached for the photo.

Shayne dropped the photo. At the same second, aware of Vellos' concentration, Shayne shot forward and caught the end of the rifle. Vellos fired twice, but Shayne deflected the shots. He wrapped his powerful hands around the gun and, a second later, twisted it away from Vellos.

Vellos grinned sickly. For fifteen seconds, he stood there without his gun. He looked at neither Shayne nor Valery. Once he did glance up at the dangling rope. He laughed.

With a sudden motion that caught Shayne by surprise, Vellos raced across the glass floor towards the main entrance. Apparently he knew some way of opening it quickly and getting out.

One item stood in his way. It was the huge glass case housing the one black flacon of perfume. The bullet had shattered the glass so that the case resembled an ice cave with dangling icicles. One of those icicles was a long straight spear. Even as Vellos dashed forward, the icicle fell. Skidding, unable to stop, Vellos impaled himself on it. He twisted slightly, then collapsed.

Valery screamed.

The white phone rang. It was a few seconds before Shayne could force himself to pick it up. He noticed his hand was shaking. "Yeah?"

"Mike, is that you? Tim, here! I thought you might try to pull a sneak into the Grand Miami. Guess what? Peanut called. Seems he was asking around. And there was a Cuban Subcontractor, who did some work for the Grand Miami. Down at their River Warehouse.

"Know that big billboard with the big nude broad? Yeah, I know. Anyway, this guy said he rigged a passageway behind the billboard and into the warehouse. There's a secret door. He didn't have the vaguest idea of how or why it might be used. And, about Dallas . . ."

"I know."

"You know about the ringer?"

"I found out. His houseboy did it. Vellos found it convenient to have somebody who could play his role."

"And the phone?"

"Tricky, that. It took some doing, but I happened to call earlier today. The phone rings, somebody answers. Sounds real, but it's all on tape. All done electronically. Fred used his same device to make his drug contacts think he was at home. When, in reality, he was out gunning them down."

"Mike!" Valery was pulling at Shayne's arm. "Hurry up!"

"Thanks, Tim. It's all over. I've got some unfinished business to attend to."

Valery closed her eyes, opened them, closed them, again. She was going to collapse. "Is Vellos . . .?"

"Yes, he's dead!"

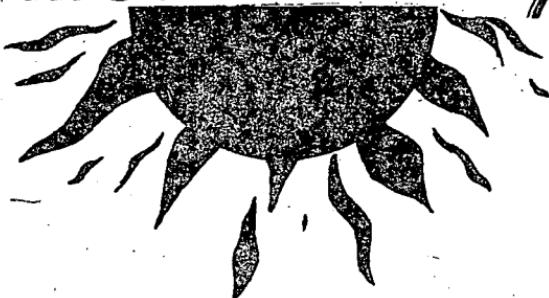
"Mike, I'm sorry you got caught in this mess. Nobody has paid you. We all owe you so much. And certainly, I . . ."

Shayne stopped Valery's fumbling and bumbling. He did it by closing her lips with his. When she finally struggled up for air, she asked, "Okay, your place?"

Shayne didn't answer. He simply nodded and reached for the phone to call Will Gentry. Strange how, after all the trouble and all the contamination or whatever the hell it was, how he still felt about her. He hated her perfume, but he could wash that off.

The only thing he couldn't wash off was what Vellos and Circus Joe had done to her. But he could try.

Three Hot Days



EDWARD D. HOCH

Betty Drover's neurotic fear that she was to be the Strangler's next victim drove her to all sorts of unjust suspicions.

BETTY DROVER'S husband left town on the first day of the September heat wave, promising to return for the weekend. After two years of married life she was more or less resigned to the business trip that took him to New York every few months. Still, the hot apartment was a terrible thing to face alone. It almost made her wish for her old job at the air-conditioned insurance office downtown.

The heat wave was late in coming. It was already two weeks past Labor Day, and Betty had been looking forward to those crisp autumn days when a walk in the park, through scatterings of fallen leaves, was an afternoon treat. Perhaps that was why

she minded it so much—that and the news of the Strangler which was in the papers almost daily.

Ever since the murders in Boston there had been stranglers up all over the country, and it was not surprising that her city should yield one too. The *Lakemont Strangler*, as the papers had taken to calling him, had killed four women so far—all while alone in their apartments. It was enough to scare the wits out of any girl, especially one whose husband had gone to New York on business.

Their apartment, luckily, had an entrance foyer which could be locked off from the rest of the rooms, and it had proven handy for deliveries even before

the Strangler trouble. They were having friends in for Saturday evening, after Mark's return from New York, so on Wednesday morning, Betty decided the dining-room rug needed dry cleaning.

It was an off-white furry thing she had purchased in a supreme moment of impracticality, only to find that it had to be sent out for dry cleaning every few months if it was to keep its original color. She had tried rug shampoo and spot cleaners to no avail, so now she telephoned the cleaner in the next block and asked him to send somebody for the rug.

As she often did now, she placed a small note on the unlocked outer door: *Cleaner—Rug is in foyer. Must have back by Friday.* Then she locked herself into the apartment proper and set to work on her weekly cleaning chores. The telephone distracted her once, and then a neighbor dropped by to borrow the morning newspaper.

"How do you like the weather?" the neighbor asked. She was a retired school teacher named Sylvia Brown, who never spent a penny she didn't have to.

"I don't," Betty sighed. "They say it's going to be ninety-five today."

"And with this humidity!"

"You'd think by the eighteenth of September we'd be entitled to some cooler weather."

Sylvia scanned the front page of the paper. "No new strangling, at least. That's *something* to be thankful for! I'll bet you're frightened to be alone. Mark's away so much of the time . . ."

Betty resented the idea and was quick to defend him. "That's his job. He has sales meetings in New York. He'll be back Friday night. I don't mind it for that long."

Sylvia Brown sniffed. "Well, if you want to stay with me a couple of nights, I'd be glad to have you."

"No thanks." Betty's reply was cool.

After Sylvia returned to her own apartment, Betty set to work on her cleaning. It wasn't till nearly noon that she decided to do some shopping. She was all but out of bread and oranges and needed some cigarettes, too.

She picked up her purse, unlocked the foyer door—and stood face to face with a large hulking man she had never seen before.

Betty Dover screamed.

She clung to the door jamb and screamed. And screamed again.

The hulking man looked vaguely uneasy and apologetic.

"I came for the rug, ma'am. You had a note on the door . . ."

Betty's heart was beating wildly. She tried to compose herself while still clinging to the door

frame for support. "Yes, I . . . I'm sorry, I forgot. There it is, rolled up for you. I need it back by Friday."

He picked up the rug, looking a bit uncertain. "That's pretty fast service. Only two days."

"I . . . they said it was all right."

"Okay, I only work there."

She waited until he was gone, still barely able to catch her breath. Then, as she locked the apartment door behind her, Sylvia appeared in the hallway. "Did I hear you scream, dear?"

"It was nothing," Betty mumbled, tight-lipped. She could have been dead by now for all Sylvia Brown cared.

"I'm glad you're all right. I was wondering if I should call the police."

"No, no. It was nothing." She went quickly down the steps and out onto the street, cursing silently.

The hot, humid air hit her like a sledgehammer as she hurried along to the store. It must be ninety already, she guessed, and still climbing. It was the terrible humidity, of course, which made her so edgy. Made her scream at the poor man who was just doing his job. The humidity and Sylvia Brown, with all her ugly talk about the Strangler. Things like that didn't happen to women like Betty. They only happened to tramps and prostitutes and the poorer classes.

"Morning, Mrs. Drover."

It was the butcher, sweeping out his shop. She didn't speak, because she did all her buying at the supermarket now: If anyone in the neighborhood was the Strangler, it was probably the butcher, with those massive ham-like hands of his. She could almost imagine them around her throat.

That damned Sylvia Brown! Putting thoughts like this into her head! And with Mark out of town, too!

Back in the apartment she tried opening all the windows, but there was not a trace of a breeze. If anything, that only made it warmer and more humid. If she was going to be forced to stay in the apartment while Mark was away, the least he could do would be to install air conditioning.

Thinking that, she went downstairs and knocked on the landlord's door. Mr. Felix was a balding, middle-aged man, sporting a mustache that always seemed dirty with food particles. She hated Mr. Felix, but this was something of an emergency.

"Mr. Felix, we need air conditioning in our apartment!" she announced, coming right to the point.

"Air conditioning! So do I, on a day like this! Lady, we all need air conditioning. I told your husband he could put in a window unit if he wanted, but I'd have

to raise the rent to pay for the extra power. Them things can burn up the dollars mighty fast."

"I'll talk to my husband when he returns from New York. Right now I'm talking to you. What can you do for me?"

"*Do?*" He seemed to have taken interest at her statement of her husband's absence. Suddenly she wanted to run.

"Yes, *do!*"

"I could come up to your apartment and look the situation over. Maybe you got something cool we could drink, huh?"

"No, I don't have anything cool we could drink!" she replied frostily.

"Hell, lady, go out and buy an electric fan." He closed the door in her face.

For a moment she stood there in cold fury. Then she turned and went quickly upstairs. Men were all alike, really. Someone like Felix could easily be the Strangler.

Even after dark, the heat did not seem to subside. She would have liked to be able to stroll in the park for an hour, by the fountain, but somehow the thought of the Strangler put even that pleasure beyond her reach. Again she cursed Sylvia Brown for putting her in such a state.

Around eight o'clock, just after dark, there was a knock on her outside door. She walked through the foyer, heart beating rapidly, and asked. "Who's there?"

"Mr. Felix."

"What do you want?"

"I'm sorry about this afternoon. I brought you a fan, Mrs. Dровер."

Her hand was on the door-knob when she drew it back, trembling, uncertain. "I . . . Thank you. Leave it by the door, please."

"Couldn't you open up for a minute?"

"No." Firmly now. "Leave it by the door."

She listened to his footsteps going down the steps, waited another few minutes, and then opened the door. The fan was there on the floor . . .

Sleep was impossible in the humid darkness of her bedroom. She tossed off the sheet and lay nearly nude for a time, hoping to catch some faint breeze from the windows. Finally, she got up and had a cold glass of milk and sat watching an old movie on TV.

Sitting there in the half-dark at two o'clock in the morning, she was ready to admit to herself the unspoken fear she had harbored all the previous day. She was going to die. The Strangler had already marked her for his next victim and she was going to die. It was as certain as if he'd sent her an announcement. Even now she could almost feel his fingers around her throat, squeezing her windpipe.

She must have dozed in the chair, for when she awoke the television was flickering with a vague test pattern and the first light of humid dawn was streaking the eastern windows. She dressed early, breakfasted and did the rest of her shopping.

It was on the way home, with the sweat already forming in little drops on the small of her back, that she knew she was being followed. He was a short slim man, well dressed in a brown business suit. He followed at a fair distance but never let her get too far ahead.

Betty walked faster as she neared her apartment, until she almost ran up the stairs. The man was following still. She paused at her apartment door, listening to his footsteps on the stair, then in a moment of blind panic ran down the hall to Sylvia's door.

"Sylvia! Sylvia, let me in! Please let me in!"

The short man had already reached the top of the stairs when Sylvia opened the door. "What is it? What . . . ?"

But the man kept coming, right up to the door behind her. "Good morning," he said quietly. "Mrs. Brown?"

"I'm Mrs. Brown," Sylvia answered.

Betty only stood there trembling as the man identified himself. "I'm from the insurance com-

pany. You filed a claim for an accident last year?"

Betty fled to the kitchen of Sylvia's apartment and filled a glass with cold water while the two of them talked. Finally, when the man had left, Sylvia came out to join her. "My dear, you're still white as a ghost!"

"I can't help it! He was following me. He followed me right up the steps!"

"Naturally. He was coming here to see me. He looks just like an insurance man. I don't know how you could have been frightened of him. You used to work in an insurance office."

"He looked like the Strangler to me!"

"Betty—I think the humidity has got you down. You're not being reasonable."

"I know I'm going to be killed, Sylvia. I know it!"

"That's nonsense."

"The Strangler *doesn't* kill just prostitutes and poor people. He kills people just like me."

"There hasn't been a murder in more than a week. He's probably left town."

Betty drank another glass of cold water and smoked a cigarette. Her nerves were shot with the heat, but now she had a bit better grip on herself. Finally, thanking Sylvia, she returned to her own apartment.

That night, Thursday, she decided to retire early. She had hardly slept the night before and

there was nothing else to do anyway. For a time, she rested on the bed, watching the television news, but it only reminded her of her fears.

"There's no break yet in the Strangler case, according to the police, though a number of leads are being investigated. It's now been eight days since the fourth victim of the . . ."

She switched it off and climbed back into bed. In all this heat, would she ever be able to sleep?

She awoke, sweating, her ears attuned to some far-off sound. It might have been hours or only minutes since she drifted off to sleep. There was no way of knowing. But the sound came again—the rasp of a key in a lock. Someone was entering her apartment.

"Who . . . ?" she breathed, her voice no more than a warm whisper.

In the dimness of the apartment, her eyes focussed on the dark blue rectangle of the open bedroom door. Footballs, soft on the thickness of carpeting, were coming closer . . .

Closer . . .

"Who's there?" she yelled, her voice cracking.

A dim figure appeared in the doorway, and snapped on the overhead light. "It's me—Mark! I didn't mean to scare you. It's only a bit after ten."

"Mark! I . . . why aren't you still in New York?"

"I forgot something. Had to come back for it." He walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. "Why, you're trembling."

"I was asleep. I heard you at the door."

"I'm sorry. I should have pressed the buzzer downstairs. Try to go back to sleep. I'll make myself some coffee."

She listened to the sounds of him in the kitchen, telling herself that she should be pleased at his homecoming a night early. But she was not pleased. Mark never forgot anything. Why had he driven the two hours from New York when she knew he would have to be back there in the morning?

"Mark?"

"Yes, dear?"

"What was it you forgot?"

"What?" He turned from the sink to face her. "Oh, just some papers."

"That's not like you."

"No. Well, I . . ."

"Don't you have a meeting in New York tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'll have to drive back in the morning."

He poured two cups of coffee and came toward her with one. She took it, studying his face and eyes. "I don't believe you," she said at last. "You're lying."

"What? Why would I lie?"

The cup was vibrating against the saucer she held. Her hand was actually trembling. She looked down at it and then back

up at her husband's face. "You came back to kill me, didn't you? To strangle me so it would look like another one of the killings."

"Don't be silly, Betty. What's the matter with you tonight?"

"Don't come any nearer! *Stay back!*"

"Betty, Betty . . ."

She hit the end table, upsetting the vase, and then he was gripping her shoulders. "I'll scream!"

"Betty, get hold of yourself. It's the damned heat. I'm not trying to kill you!"

"Then why'd you come back?"

"If you must know, Sylvia Brown phoned me in New York and told me you were acting strange. She suggested I drive back tonight."

"Sylvia? Sylvia *phoned* you?"

"That's right."

"How'd she know which hotel you were at?"

"I always stay at the same one. She knows that."

Betty relaxed a little in his arms. "I *have* been upset, it's true. Ever since Sylvia started talking about the Strangler yesterday morning, I've had the most terrible feeling that I was going to be his next victim."

"That's foolish."

"Stay with me, Mark. Don't leave me now."

"You're convinced I don't intend to kill you?"

"I must be going mad to have thought such a thing. These

last two days . . . I screamed at the rug man, and wouldn't let Mr. Felix in with a fan, and I thought some man was following me, and now I accused you!"

"It's just the weather. It's been very, very humid here, and sometimes that does things to people."

"Just stay, Mark, and I'll be all right."

"I'll stay. I'll drive back to New York in the morning."

Friday was the hottest morning yet, and when he left before eight for the two-hour drive into Manhattan, Betty got out Mr. Felix's fan to try for some relief. The temperature was ninety-nine, heading over the hundred mark, and the radio announcer could do nothing but offer some relief on Saturday, when it might only be eighty-five.

They were having some friends in for dinner on Saturday evening, and there was much to be done. More shopping, and the cleaning that seemed to go on endlessly in the small apartment.

Sylvia did not stop in to see her as often as she did. Perhaps she was feeling guilty for having phoned Mark in New York.

Just before noon, while Betty was thinking that perhaps she should go down the hall to see Sylvia, there was a knock on her own door. "Sylvia? Who is it? Is that you?"

"Rug man," a voice mumbled.

"Oh!" She sighed and opened

the door. It was the burly man from the other day, with her rug tucked safely under one arm. "Come in, come in."

"Where do you want it, lady?"

"Bring it into the living room here." She looked at him, embarrassed. "You know, I owe you an apology for the other day when I screamed. My nerves were just on edge."

"That's all right," he said. He placed the white rug in the center of the floor and unrolled it.

"All this business about the Strangler. You understand, don't you?"

"Sure, ma'am. You want to just sign this receipt, right here?"

She accepted the pencil and signed her name. "Tell them they did a very good job."

"I will."

He didn't move, and she said, making conversation, "It's still hot out, isn't it?"

"Sure is. Humid. Like the middle of summer."

"Well, as I said, I'm sorry about the other day. I . . ."

She saw his hands coming up then, great hams of hands just as she'd imagined in her nightmares. She watched them coming, fascinated, and felt them fasten around her throat.

This time, of course, it was too late to scream.

COMPLETE IN THE NEXT MIKE SHAYNE—

MURDER ON THE AISLE

A TERRIFYING AND SWIFT MOVING

MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The Miami Private Eye goes all out when Lucy Hamilton becomes the target of a hitman's bullet intended for Shayne himself

One Blonde, Well Dead

JOE R. LANDSDALE

Private detective Raymond Slater fought live alligators, hoods with guns, and a martial arts expert to find the killer of a blonde hooker. It amazed even him what he would do for money. But the question was: would he live to spend it?

THE BUSTY BLONDE was frightened.

Her black, platform shoes beat a staccato rhythm against the peeling grey dock boards. Their sound sharply punctuated the gentle lapping of the waves, the creaking of the pilings.

She glanced over her shoulder, trying to discern what she could sense but could not see. There was nothing. Just the dock, the tumbling water, the smell of fish, and a chain of tin boat-houses standing out under the moonlight like a row of marble tombstones.

She hurried on faster.

Ahead of her lay light and refuge in the form of the Gulf side restaurant *The Pelican's Table*. It seemed to her as far away as the Hawaiian Islands.

That's when she started to run.

It was a decision made too late. There was a sudden jerk at her throat followed by a biting pain. She felt herself lifted up and off her feet, and the cry she started became a gurgle. Something wet and warm splashed beneath her chin, onto her lowcut, white blouse. The lights of *The Pelican's Table* began to spin before her eyes like a roulette wheel, seemed to blaze with a white-hot intensity.

Then suddenly, the pain was gone. In its place came darkness . . . and then nothing . . .

II

ALLIGATORS! Long, green and evil looking. Three of them, with teeth like stilettos and glowing eyes. Or so the black Cadillac's headbeams made them seem.

It didn't seem to bother the

Cadillac's driver. He merely stopped and let them make their slow meander across the road before him. The starless heavens, the almost silent hum of the car's engine, the bug-swarmed glow of the headbeams, gave the night a Halloweenish touch and made the 'gators all the more grotesque and deadly looking.

The three reptiles made their way across and disappeared into the tree-dotted, heavily shadowed swamp water to the left of the road.

Private detective Raymond Slater, in the back seat of the Caddy making the tip of his cigarette glow ruby red, used the electric switch on the armrest to send his window down. He listened to the water break before the heavy bodies of the reptiles. The air outside was sticky warm and stank of brackish swamp water. Slater sent the window up again.

"Your boss like having those 'gators around?" the detective asked.

The driver, a lean man with sandy hair and a drooping mustache, said, "Uh-huh. That's what the wall around this place is for—twenty acres of it. Boss had them 'gators brought in here special. Not too many of them in these parts any more. Gulf City used to be full of them."

"One thing is for sure," Slater said. "Your boss isn't short on dough."

"That he ain't," the other man said. He was heavy, crew cut, greasy faced. He sat in the front seat on the passenger's side. He was leaning across the seat, looking at Slater. A .38 was in his hand. He kept it pointed in the general direction of the detective.

"Them things make hellish watchdogs," the man with the gun continued. "Nobody wants to be climbing the wall around this place, not after they see them babies."

The driver put the Caddy in gear, eased forward. "They can bite you in half with one chomp," he said. "Saw one get hold of one of the boss' Dobermans once. *Yetch!*"

"Yeah, well," the detective said. "This is interesting, but surely your boss didn't have you nab me just so I could tour the property."

"Boss'll tell you face to face," the crew-cut man said. "He says fetch and we fetch. We don't ask why. Payday's all we're after."

"Just the old nine to five."

Slater spoke sourly. Then he turned his attention to the dark scenery skirting by. Both sides of the narrow dirt road were bordered by swamp and dotted by leafy willows and dangling vines and moss. It looked like a great location for a new *creature* movie.

Then, to add to the already creepy atmosphere, came *the house*. *The Seven Gables* would have loved it.

Baroque and dismal, it stood stark against the night, with peaked roof and dripping eaves—two stories of Gothic structure stolen from the minds of Hawthorne and Poe.

There was a six-foot stone wall surrounding it, and this opened into the curving dirt road by means of an intricately designed wrought-iron gate. A solitary window on the bottom floor looked out at the world with soft yellow light.

"Swell place," Slater said. "And another wall yet! Who is he trying to keep out?"

The driver chuckled. "The outside wall keeps the 'gators in, and this one keeps them out." With that, the driver pulled the Caddy before the gate and punched a button beneath the dash. The gate clicked and folded back. The long black Caddy glided inside. The gate closed behind them.

The driver killed the engine.

The crew-cut man waved his gun at Slater, said, "Don't get out yet. The damn Dobermans don't know us from beefsteak, and they see us every day."

No sooner said than two formidable Dobermans broke out of the darkness, growling. They were followed by a huge black man with

a bald head and a leash in his hand. He was wearing white coveralls. He called up one of the dogs softly, attached the leash and led the dog away. Darkness ate him up. The other Doberman continued to growl at the car. A few moments later, the man returned and led the remaining dog away.

"Can't he just call them?" Slater asked.

"Nope," the driver said. "They don't work that way."

The black man returned, waved a hand at them. They opened the car doors and got out. The black man left ahead of them, went into the house. Lights went on.

"He always so sociable?" Slater asked.

"Actually," the crew-cut fellow said, "he's rather worked up today. We call him Eclipse on account of he's so big he blocks out the sun. He's the boss' personal bodyguard."

With the detective between the two, they went into the house.

The room they were in was like a museum. Armor, colorful tapestries and a variety of weapons decorated the walls—cutlasses, bayonets, cap-and-ball pistols, maces, pikes, halberds, shields—they hung in such an array that little of the wall showed.

"Just a minute," the skinny walrus said. He left Slater and his companion, went through a side

door, and closed it. Moments later, he was back. "Boss'll see you now." With that, he beckoned Slater to follow, turned and went back through the door, with Slater and Crew Cut in tow.

The room was somewhat smaller than the one they had just left, if no less lavish. This time it was adorned with animal heads rather than weapons and armor. The wall was a mass of fur, horns and bared fangs. There were several ashtrays made from the feet of elephants, grim reminders of once-powerful beasts reduced to nothing more than sand-filled receptacles. The furniture—large, soft looking chairs and a very long couch—was covered with a variety of animal hides—Zebra, lion, tiger...

Behind a wide black-walnut desk in a black swivel chair, the bald giant standing next to him like an ebony statue, sat the Boss. He was a dapper little man with a too-large head, thin, reddish hair and a complexion like strawberry jam. He wore a burgundy jacket, white shirt and black string tie. There was a grey Stetson parked on the right side of his desk.

"Sit down, Mr. Slater," the Boss said, his voice as smooth as well-aged whiskey.

Slater pulled up a gaudy zebra-hide chair, sat down and crossed his legs. He got out the third of five cigarettes he ra-

tioned himself daily, lit it with a wooden match that he struck across the hardwood floor.

"We done searched him, Boss. He's clean," Crew Cut said.

Slater shrugged. "Except for the derringer in the swivel heel of my shoe. They missed that."

The boss smiled a piranha-toothed smile. "You know me, Slater?"

Slater pursed his lips, considered. "Should I?"

"I guess not," the Boss said, leaning back comfortably in his chair, crossing his hands on his lap. "The name's Mason. Jack Mason."

"Not old Slant Oil Well Mason?"

Mason unzipped his grin again. "One and the same."

Slater nodded. "All right, Mason. How come you had these two stooges bring me here at gunpoint? What can I do for you? Provided I want to do anything for you."

Mason clasped little liver-spotted hands together. "I'd like to make you a proposition—very sporting, I might add. Find out how Pamela Shutters died."

"Who?"

"Pamela Shutters." He formed the words slowly, deliberately, as if Slater were a child being introduced to a multi-syllabic word for the first time. "Haven't you seen the papers?"

"Just the funnies."

"I see." Mason picked a long-stemmed pipe from his desk top and punched tobacco from a teak wood humidor into it. The ebony giant lit it with a large ivory lighter that seemed to appear from nowhere.

"That was pretty slick," Slater said. "Does he do other tricks, besides that and gathering up the dogs."

The giant answered for himself. His voice was velvety smooth, strange in such a huge body. "That I can, little man. Perhaps I should give you a lesson in manners."

"No," Mason said. "Mr. Slater wouldn't do me much good as a pretzel." He leaned forward, his manner patronizing. "Mr. Slater, Eclipse, as we call him, is a personal bodyguard. I pay good money, lots of it, for his assistance. I want to pay you some money."

"Lots of it?"

"Uh-huh. Lots of it. But not as a bodyguard. But just so we reach an understanding, I'll have Eclipse give you a little demonstration."

"If it's Fuller brushes, you can save it. I've seen it twice already."

"You're not exactly a pleasant personality, Mr. Slater," Mason said.

Slater shrugged his shoulders.

Mason said, "Hoover—get out a cigarette."

Hoover, the one who had driven the car, did as he was told. His face went pale and the expression on it seemed to say he wasn't over-happy about this. He shook out a weed and put it between his lips, walked to the center of the room. "You ought to have Kelsey do this sometime," he said.

"No. I like you," Eclipse said. "You've got thin lips."

Mason smiled.

Kelsey kept very still, watched Hoover with his cigarette.

Slater looked as interested in the whole matter as a spare tire.

"Now don't shake, Hoover," Mason said. "It makes Eclipse nervous."

"Makes *him* nervous?" Hoover mumbled over the cigarette, but he straightened himself like a Marine recruit just called to attention.

Eclipse was two hundred pounds of sudden cat-like motion. He moved across the carpet like a panther stalking prey. He walked over and stood directly in front of the stiffly erect Hoover. They were about three feet apart.

With a sudden animal cry, Eclipse leaped into the air, spun completely about and lashed out his leg like a whip. His heel neatly clipped the cigarette from Hoover's mouth without as much as touching him.

Eclipse landed lightly.

Hoover began to breath normally, relaxed his body, plucked bits of tobacco and paper from his

lips, carried them over to one of the elephant-foot ashtrays and deposited them. He looked very happy to have the whole thing over with. His face was pelleted with sweat.

Eclipse went back to his position behind the desk, his face a stone mask. Slater tried to keep his face the same way, but he was impressed.

"*Hapkido*," Mason said. "A Korean fighting art. Very deadly."

"Especially hard on cigarettes," Slater said.

Mason smiled his tight little smile, returned the temporarily absent pipe to his mouth. "You interested in the Shutters deal?"

"What's the deal?" Slater asked.

Mason puffed up a cloud. "Sources tell me you're a good private investigator."

"I'm flattered. About Shutters?"

"She used to work for me. Before that she was a call girl. Together we got this racket working. We dug up dirt. We had what you might call a blackmail agency. People with nice reputations they didn't want to lose paid us handsome sums to keep our mouths shut and not mail any flat folders with compromising pictures inside."

"Pam, having been a call girl, had a lot of good connections. She knew a lot of people before they knew she had

changed game plans. We made a lot of hidden movies of her and some bigwigs doing fun things. We were sitting real pretty till the cops put the squeeze on us—and we would have continued to sit pretty, if Pam hadn't squealed her pretty little blonde head off. She took a light sentence for squealing and I took the full rap."

"I understand the rap you took was for more than that," Slater said. "Slant oil wells, extortion, dipping into—"

"Right enough," Mason interrupted. "But that little deal with Pam is what got me in the bird cage. I swore I'd get her when I got out. The police put her into hiding for a while, just in case I should hire it done. Bars don't stop my operation."

"Things went pretty good for me anyway. I got out without having to finish the whole sentence. But I still lost five years of my life. I sent my men all over Texas and everywhere else, looking for that slut. But after the cops dropped their protection, she hid real good. My people couldn't locate her. Next thing I know . . ." Mason picked up a folded newspaper off his desk, handed it to Eclipse.

The giant, moving light as a cat, went over to Slater and handed the paper to the detective. A spot was squared in black ink. Slater read it. It told how Pamela Shutters had had her

throat cut on the dock next to a restaurant called *The Pelican's Table*.

Slater dropped the paper beside his chair. "You should be happy," he said.

"Oh, I am," Mason said. "But here's the corker. The cops are pressing *me* for the rap. They think *I* did it, or rather, had it done. I want you to find out who the real murderer is. I may have wanted it done, but I don't want heat on my tail for something I didn't do."

Mason took a long crocodile wallet from his coat, opened it, fanned out some green backs on the desk. "Ten thousand dollars," he said. "Probably more than you make in a year if you can cool the cops. I'll give you a thousand now if you take the job, and the rest if you succeed. The first thousand is yours no questions asked. What say?"

Slater stood up, sauntered over the desk.

Mason smirked at him.

Eclipse looked at him like a hungry dog watching a bone.

Slater palmed the bills apart. They were thousand-dollar bills all right—ten of them.

"All right," the big detective said plucking up one of the bills. "It's a deal."

III

"CAN'T TELL you," Burney

said. "Besides, that was Gulf City business. I don't mess with that or Houston, just Pasadena."

"Bull!" Slater said. "You got the scoop on it just like the Houston cops and every little town within twenty-five miles of Gulf City. Maybe fifty. I know you, Burn. You take an interest in everything."

Slater and the little Homicide dick, Randle Burney, were scuttling down the narrow hallway that led to Burney's cubicle of an office. The place smelled of sweat over boiled coffee and tobacco smoke. Burney opened the door to his office and Slater went in behind him.

Burney got behind his desk, put his heels on it. Slater pulled up a chair opposite Burney and got out a cigarette but didn't light it. He just put it between his lips and let it dangle. It was part of his quit-smoking program—delay as long as possible.

"You're going to ride me till I either tell you something, or throw you out—right, Ray?"

"I just want a little information," the detective said. "No big deal. We go through this every time. Why?"

Burney ignored that, said, "How'd you get into this? Working for Mason is as low as a man can go."

"I'll let my conscience be my guide—along with the ten thousand dollars he offered me last night."

Burney let a whistle slide between his teeth, then, "Ten thousand!"

"As crisp as fresh lettuce," Slater said. "You owe me, Burn. Remember that health spa murder? Right under your nose and I had to sniff it out for you."

Burney frowned, got out a cigar, and lit it with his desk lighter. "If I remember right, Ray. I got you that job—recommended you. And besides. I've already repaid that favor. Twice, this month."

"I'm a little hurt—right *here*." Slater said, touching his heart. "A friend that keeps count on favors."

"And one that loses count," Burney said, nodding his head.

"Come on," Slater said. "Help me out."

Burney took the cigar out of his mouth, leaned forward. "Look Ray. This time I'm not just making it hard for you. It's not even that there's that much classified, it's just that I don't know much about it."

"Then tell me what you *do* know," Slater said, lighting his cigarette with Burney's lighter.

"All right." Burn leaned back. "From memory. Shutters used to work for Mason—but you know about that. So let's start with the part about how she got strangled."

"Strangled?" Slater asked.

"Technically. That's why I remember, because it was a little

oddball. A razor-sharp wire, something like a piano wire, was used on her. A commando technique. It sliced through her throat like a knife through hot butter."

"Suspects?"

"Your client gets top billing," Burn said. "But to tell the truth, it seems odd he would hire a P.I. to check into it. All he needs is for someone to find some incriminating evidence, and *zap!* It's the slammer for him."

"What else on Shutters?"

"That's it Ray. I swear. I know none of that's any help, but that's it."

"All right. One other thing. You got a list of Shutters' next of kin? Anything like that?"

"Nope. That I might hustle up for you later. I do know she has a sister. She bailed Pamela out a few times in years past."

"She a prostitute too?"

"No. A pretty high-class gal, if I remember right. Name was Vicki . . . Sisk, I think. Yeah, Sisk—Vicki Sisk. Her husband was some sort of big war hero in Vietnam. A posthumous hero, that is."

"Any idea where she lives?"

"That part I don't remember, believe it or not."

"No sweat," Slater said. "If she's clean, the phone book will probably help me there." The big detective got up. "Maybe I can check on that next of kin stuff later."

Burney said, "Don't count on it. I'm a busy man. I got better things to do than look up the next kin of dead whores for private detectives."

"But a swell guy like you doesn't mind," Slater said, turning toward the door.

"Naw, not me. Not old swell Burn."

"See you," Slater said, and he went out.

Vicki Sisk proved easy to find.

Slater checked through a couple of phone books—Pasadena and Gulf City—and found her under a Gulf City listing. He wrote down the number and drove over there.

Vicki lived in a red brick house that was as much like the others on the block as carefully matched China. Slater went up to the door and rang the bell.

A flame-haired soft-faced beauty with violet eyes and gaunt fashion-model cheeks, answered the door. She was wrapped in a blue and black oriental robe. She kept her hand ready on the door-knob. She wasn't smiling.

"If you're a cop," she said, "I've talked to all the cops I'm going to talk to for awhile. I've answered every question there is—twice. Give me a break, huh?" And she started with the door.

Slater put out a beefy palm "Excuse me. I'm not a cop."

She scrutinized the detective with her lovely violet eyes. "Then what do you want?"

"I'm a private detective. I've been hired by a party that wishes to remain unnamed to investigate your sister's death. It's as simple as that. I'm not trying to force you to talk to me, but it could help."

Vicki's eyes softened, her full lips eased. "Ah. You're the one Lieutenant Mires mentioned."

Slater frowned. Word moved fast. Very fast for Lieutenant Ishmael Mires of the Gulf City force to know he was involved. Mires' knowing wouldn't help matters any. He and Mires had had their clashes more than once.

"A kind word for me, I'm sure," Slater said.

Vicki smiled beautifully. "He must have been speaking French."

"If he knows I'm involved, then who the hell doesn't? He probably told you who I'm working for. He would have to know."

"He does—Mason."

Slater sighed. "And, I suppose, if I'm working for that person, you'd rather not talk to me."

"Not at all," Vicki said. "If Mason is innocent, he deserves his chance. Come in, Mr. Slater."

The interior of the house was done in Oriental. Sliding bamboo doorways, woodcuts of Japanese fisherman, paintings, tapestries and ceramics with an Oriental motif. Most of the furniture was low and made of bamboo, but there were a few American chairs.

Somehow they all blended pleasantly.

"Nice," Slater said.

"Thank you. I went to Thailand to live when my husband was stationed there. Later, we lived in Japan. I liked it so much I kept a bit of the Oriental about me, even after Tom died. Sit down. You'd probably prefer a chair. Drink?"

"No thanks," Slater said. He tried one of the chairs. American or not, it seemed to be a flimsy thing, too delicate for his frame. He reconsidered and sat on the low divan. He didn't think it was too uncomfortable. Vicki sat at the other end of it, crossed her legs so that the robe fell away to show a good portion of them. They were sleek and honey colored.

"You want to know when I last saw Pam and want to know who might want her dead?" Vicki said.

"The cops *have* drilled you," Slater said. "Pardon me for saying so, but you don't look exactly torn up about this whole thing."

"I'm not," she admitted. "There was a time when I would have been. Not now. Pam and I took completely opposite views of life, as you probably know. We didn't come from the best of families, but I was determined to do better. Does this sound like a rags-to-riches story?"

"Not at all."

"I became a stewardess and

Pam became a whore. Or perhaps I should say a call girl. She didn't have to stand at street corners and lean on lamps, and she got better pay. But it's the same thing."

"You've told the cops," Slater said, changing the line of thought. "But now tell *me*. When was the last time you saw Pamela?"

"About five years ago. Shortly after the Mason thing. The blackmail racket. You know about that, right?"

Slater nodded.

"Well, that was it. I tried to give her as much help as I possibly could. But she disappeared, went into hiding and I never heard from her again. Until the police and the papers. I lost any feeling I might have had for Pam years ago. As for who killed her. I'd say Mason had it done. Of course, there might be Vance Tracer."

"Vance Tracer?"

"An old boyfriend of hers."

"You tell the cops about this?"

"No. I hadn't thought of it till just now. Vance just skipped my mind. But it could be. I mean he has a motive."

"What's that?"

"He had some money once. Before Pam. That's the way you describe men with her—before and after. Only in her case, the after is the emaciated specimen. Vance owned a string of real estate. A hotel, several motor inns here in Gulf City. Among other things. But he let Pam get

to him. She bled him like a butchered hog. Then, when he was flat as a man can get, she left him. True love was not one of her virtues.

"Vance pined away about it for a year or so. He used to come over here looking for her. He'd be dead drunk and half violent. He made a lot of threats when he was drunk, and once he did find her—not here, but with another man.

"In a restaurant, I think. I don't remember exactly where. He slugged her a couple of times. She looked like a racoon for a while. But it was all just business to her. In her trade, that was one of the hazards."

"She see him again?"

"Not much! She didn't press charges. She was hardly in a position to nose around with the cops. He dropped out of her life and I heard tell that he was nearly bankrupt by then. He just had that one hotel left, *The Tracer*, and now that part of Gulf City is just a dump. A hangout for winos.

"Anyway, it wasn't long afterward that Mason got sent up, and Pam, because of the deal she made, went into hiding. That's it. That's all I know. Next thing, she's dead. If all this sounds neatly rehearsed, it's because I've had plenty of practice lately."

"I understand," Slater said. "But the part about Tracer . . ."

"No. I didn't tell the police that. I forgot about it. Should I tell them?"

"Probably. How about thinking of it tomorrow."

Vicki smiled. "Okay, I'll do that. It won't matter much anyway."

"I don't want to take up any more of your time," Slater said, standing. "Oh, there is one more thing. Tracer. Where's he staying these days?"

"I don't know. But a good guess might be that ragged old hotel of his. Just a minute." She got up and disappeared into the next room, returned shortly with a phonebook cradled in her hands. "Here's the address."

Slater got out his pad and pen and wrote it down. "Thanks again. I'll be going now."

"Watch out for his sister," Vicki said. "She's as protective as a bulldog. She used to call here every time Vance went on a bender. She sounded like a mother looking for her little boy. A real oddball woman."

"I'll watch," Slater promised.

He drove over and found *The Hotel Tracer*.

IV

IT WAS grimy. It was fronted by a large flyspecked window, and on that in peeling paint was *o el Tracer*. The lettering painted on the bricks above the door-

way and tattered awning, was less discernible than that. The awning over the double doors was ripped and rotting. A long piece of it dangled down and touched Slater on the shoulder as he opened the door and went inside.

There was air-conditioning inside, but not much. It was the sort that just made you wish you had the real thing. It seemed to be stirring up a lukewarm atmosphere rather than cooling the place.

No one was in the lobby, not that anyone in his right mind would have been brave enough to sit in those lobby chairs anyway. A rickety staircase made a desperate climb to the second floor. It looked like the sort of thing you'd mount only with rope and harness.

Sitting behind a long desk that might once have smacked of class, a man with a pocked nose and hair like hay leaned on his palm and snoozed.

Slater went over to the desk and bounced the little bell there. The desk clerk came off his palm like a catapult shot. "Huh?" he said.

"You know a guy named Tracer?" Slater asked the blinking clerk. "Vance Tracer."

"Why's that?" a woman's voice interjected. Slater turned to see a heavy-set brunette in a faded blue-and-white print dress halfway down the dilapidated stairway.

Slater said to the woman, "You know him?"

"If you're a bill collector," she said, "you'll just have to wait. You can't *make* people stay in this hotel."

Slater thought, *I can believe that.* He said. "Then you know him?"

She gave a resigned shrug, nodded in the direction of the desk clerk, said, "Close as your shadow."

Slater turned back to the clerk. "Tracer?"

The man nodded. He looked older than Slater had expected. He had the mottled complexion of a boozer and the frame of a man bent by grief and time. His eyes were dead.

"No duns," Slater said. "Just a few questions about Pam Shutters."

There was something behind those eyes after all. Tracer blinked. "Pam's dead," he said.

"I know. I'm Raymond Slater, a private investigator. I've been employed to look into her death. Maybe find out who did it."

The woman had made her way to the bottom of the stairs now. She slid in behind the desk and put a motherly arm around Tracer's shoulders. "I didn't know private investigators did that sort of thing."

"They don't, normally, Miss . . ."

"Tracer. I'm Vance's sister, Mary."

"I see. Well, Miss Tracer, I won't be long. Just a few questions."

"You won't be here at all, Mr. Slater. You'll be leaving. I don't have to answer these questions and neither does my brother. He's torn up enough about it. He was foolish enough to love that little slut."

"Mary," Vance said, "the man might find out who killed Pam."

Mary looked at Vance, softly maternal. "She wasted you away, and you still care for that little tramp." She shook her head, looked hard at the detective. "Would you believe this dump was once a nice place before that woman? He just quit attending to business. I couldn't do it all alone. He hasn't done a thing since her but drink and grieve. No questions, Mr. Slater."

"If he doesn't want to answer questions, I can't force him," Slater said. "Good day."

"No! Wait a minute," Vance said. "What is it you want to know?"

"Let him go, Van," Mary said. "What do you want to know?" Vance repeated.

"Forget that whore," Mary snapped. "I've tried to protect you."

Vance's hand was a blinding arch. He backhanded her in the mouth, sent her careening into the dusty, empty letter boxes.

Slater's hand flicked across

the desk. It caught Vance by the collar and hoisted him halfway over the counter. Slater's free hand was as relaxed as a rubber hose while he slapped Vance four times in a quick succession. Palm, backhand, palm, backhand.

Still clutching Vance's collar, Slater spoke through clenched teeth. "Just call me old fashioned sumbitch, but you don't hit women like that when I'm around. Not for those reasons."

"It's all right," Mary said. Her mouth dribbled blood.

Slater relaxed his grip, lowered Vance back on his stool. A stream of blood had dribbled from the corner of his mouth and was running down his chin.

Mary reached under the counter and brought out a dirt-splotched rag. She wiped Vance's lip with it, then her own.

Slater shook his head. He said, "You still want to answer questions, Vance, or are you and me not on speaking terms now?"

Vance grunted, pushed Mary's hand away. "I'll answer. Get on with it." Suddenly the gruffness went out of his voice. He turned to Mary, slipped his arm around her waist. "Didn't mean it, sugar. I swear. I'm not worth a good goddam anymore."

"It's all right," Mary spoke gently. She looked at Slater. "Take it easy, huh? He's been drinking. When he drinks, he doesn't always think too well."

Slater didn't answer her. He looked at Vance. "When was the last time you saw Pam?"

"About a week ago," Vance said. "She came in here looking for me."

"That's right," Mary said.

"What for?" the detective asked.

"Just wanted to rehash some old things. She knew I still carried a torch for her. Maybe she just felt sorry for me. I don't know. I didn't try to fight it.

"We talked. She was sort of in disguise. Been hiding these last few years. Had her hair died blonde, had lost a few pounds. She still looked slick. Lovely as ever.

"We made a date for *The Pelican's Table* the other night. It was an old hangout of ours. I guess I was trying to get some kindling in the old stove. She never did meet me there. I damn near thought I was going to drown myself. I figured she was up to her old tricks, you know. Found someone else and just let me slide. That is, till I saw the papers."

"You talk to the cops?" Slater asked.

Vance shook his head. "Didn't see any need. I never got to see her. Now she's dead. It doesn't matter now." He looked at Slater, licked his lips. "You gonna sick them on me?"

"Depends," Slater said. "Far

as I can see at the moment, I won't have to."

"Thanks," Tracer said. "I need to lie down. I don't feel so good."

"One more thing," Slater said. "Did you kill her?"

Tracer's face seemed to draw in on itself. "I loved her, you sonofabitch. I wouldn't kill her."

"Not even if she was late and you'd been drinking and you were mad."

"Leave him alone," Mary said.

Slater continued. "Say you went out on the dock and saw her, Vance. Maybe you two never had a date. You just followed her there. You were drunker than you are now. Jealous because she still didn't want anything to do with you. She just stopped by for a friendly visit and you wanted to make more out of it. So you follow her out to the dock, and zip, you cut her throat. How's that sound?"

"Lousy," Vance said.

"I was just trying it on for size," Slater said.

"Thanks for taking it easy," Mary said.

"Taking it easy," Slater said, "is not what it's all about."

Vance got up, wobbled. "To hell with you. I loved her. I wouldn't kill her, you sonofabitch." With that, Vance wobbled his way to the stairway, held the creaking rail and practically pulled himself up to the second

floor landing.

"He didn't kill her." Mary spoke almost gently. "He loved her too much for that. That little whore got to him like nobody's business."

"Yeah," Slater said.

"He doesn't need your kind of talk. Alcohol is a big enough monkey on his back without you taking a ride, too."

"It's nothing personal," Slater said. He turned away and got out of there fast, feeling like a rodent in a man's shoes.

V

IT WAS HIS job, he kept telling himself, but that didn't stop the grabbing at his gut. The whole idea of working for someone like Mason ate at Slater like acid.

Was it the money?

He had to admit that money was a prime consideration. Ten crisp thousands was more money than he'd seen in quite some time.

Of course, there was justice. What if Mason could order a woman dead as easily as he could order a steak? One sirloin, well done. One blonde, well dead. What did that matter? If he were innocent this time, that was Slater's concern. See that he got a fair shake—even if he didn't deserve one.

The hell with it, he thought. He drove back to Pasadena and his favorite bar, the *Idle Hour*

Lounge, went in for a beer. When he bellied up to the bar, Ross, the lanky, towheaded bartender, slipped him a folded note.

"It's from Kline," Ross said softly, then turned away to quiet a pudgy little drunk who was beating a pretzel bowl on the bartop.

Joey Kline was a scrawny street-wise scoundrel who picked the drift off the pavement for the cops and sometimes for Slater. As he did for anyone who had the money to buy it. He was loyal to no one. Slater always kept that in mind.

The burly detective uncreased the note and read:

Slater,

Know you're on the Shutters deal. Streets are full of it. Got some good fluff for you. Meet me at the usual place tonight at nine, alone. For twenty bucks, I'll lay it on you. No jive. It's worth every dime of it, and then some.

J.K.

The street telegraph amazed Slater, even after all these years. Ross came back with a bowl of peanuts in hand, set them in front of the weary looking detective.

Ross said, "It's been an hour or so since he wrote that. He tried to call you at home a few times."

"I've been out," Slater said. He put the note in his pocket, got out some change and put it on the bar. "How about a Miller, Ross?"

Long ago Kline had introduced Slater to the "usual" place. It was a rotting two-story duplex with a stairway on the outside leading up to the second floor. No one lived in either section any more. It was a condemned building, and before long the "usual" place would be nothing more than a memory. As far as Slater was concerned, the sooner the better.

The duplex was just off Southmore Street in Pasadena, about five miles from where Slater lived. He drove over there and parked at the curb across from the battered building.

It stood alone on a half-acre lot. On either side of it rose fine, new houses. It was amazing that it had lasted this long. There weren't any lights burning inside, but then again, there weren't supposed to be. Electricity had been disconnected long ago. Slater could see Kline's blue Volkswagen parked down the block. He got his flashlight out of the glove box and, just as an extra precaution, his .38, then started across the lot for the duplex stairs.

He felt a strange crawling sensation at the nape of his neck. Something stank and it wasn't the

air pollution. He could sense it as a bunion can sense impending rain. He climbed the stairs, trying not to squeak any shoe leather.

When he got to the top, he palmed the knob, opened the sagging door. He had the flashlight in his belt and the .38 in his hand. Something was wrong. Kline usually met him at the top of the stairs.

Leaning against the door jamb, half protected by the outside wall, Slater slipped the flash out of his belt with his free hand, clicked it on and sent the beam across the floor.

Kline lay face down in a dark pool of blood.

Slater whipped the light around the room, put a cautious foot inside, finally eased in. He moved the flash around some more, followed it with the .38, saw nothing but spiderwebs and dust . . . and footprints. Lots of them, traced and scuffed in the nearly inch-thick grime. There had been a struggle, but Kline probably hadn't made much of it. He was never a fighter, just a squealer.

Slater thought he heard a board squeak. His heart made a dive for his throat. He cocked the hammer of the .38, swung the flash around to the sound. A mouse, more startled than the detective, scuttled across the floor at a dead run. Slater nearly took a shot at it.

He went over to look at Kline. It was a sad sight. He turned the scrawny informer over and using the flash, got a good look at the wound that had done him in. His throat was sliced neatly from ear to ear. Probably another one of those commando stranglings, thought Slater. He turned Kline back on his face, checked out the other two small rooms and found nothing, not even footprints.

Being careful not to fall through any rotten boards, Slater went out to the landing and down the stairs. He checked beneath the stairs and in the rooms on the bottom floor. Only darkness hid there.

He went out to his car and drove away slowly, hit Southmore, and headed for Mulberry and home.

The law was the first thing, Slater decided. He'd call Burney and tell him about Kline. Maybe he could even needle a little new information out of his friend.

He pulled the battered Chevy into his driveway, got out and went up to the front door wondering what Kline could have possibly known and planned to tell him. Maybe Kline's death wasn't connected. A stoolie isn't in a profession that makes tight buddies.

Slater unlocked the door and stepped in to a sudden pain at the back of his neck.

He felt as if the ceiling had caved in on him. He went skidding across the floor, dug a few fibres out of the threadbare carpet with his teeth.

Suddenly, he was jerked to his feet and slammed back hard against the door. In the dark he couldn't make out the thug on either side of him. They looked like huge grey boulders with arms. He could tell they wore stocking masks over their faces, but that was about it.

They were professionals. Slater knew that from the way they held him—arms pinned high above his head, their feet coiled expertly around his ankles to keep him from kicking. He was pressed so tight against the door he could hardly move at all. Not that he felt like moving after the greeting he had just received.

A third boulder, maybe a whole mountain, seemed to form out of the darkness, stood before him opening and closing odd bulky hands. No, not hands—gloved hands.

The boulder at his right elbow said, "You ask too many questions." The voice filtered through the stocking mask, had an unreal quality about it. There was nothing unreal about the man with the gloves.

He moved forward effortlessly. *Whap! Whap! Whap!* He dealt Slater three quick ones in the kidneys. There was something beneath the gloves. Brass

knuckles maybe. It seemed to Slater a rather academic question at the moment.

The gloves came again. This time hard to the solar plexus, then a lighter tap on the chin.

The room stood on a corner, wobbled, straightened itself like jello ceasing to a wiggle. A voice that sounded suspiciously like his own blew out some hot, choppy air from deep in his guts.

Someone, Slater wasn't sure who, said, "How's that for starters?"

Then the gloves were thunder and lightning against his flesh. They didn't let up. *Rattatattat*, like machine-gun fire. Two swift stunning blows under the heart, one in the ribs. None of them hard enough to break bones, but sufficient to say, "Hello," to his internal organs.

"Best forget this Shutters business," came the voice again. "Gets you sore . . . real sore . . . dead, maybe. You play it cool, hear? Remember it!'"

The thug turned the buzz-saw on and chewed Slater's body up like quarter-inch plywood.

The dazzling display of weaving, pounding fists that followed went unappreciated by the detective. He never knew when the session was over.

VI

IT WAS LATE morning when

Slater awoke to aches and pains. He was lying in a heap next to the door where the rock formations had left him.

After considerable thought on the matter, he made an effort to stand up. He got as far as one knee and one elbow, decided they passed out Purple Hearts for less. He lay back down till the urge to rise came again. That was sometime later.

This time he made it. Walking stiffly, bending slightly at the waist to ease the pain, Slater went into the bathroom and ran the tub full of hot water. He got a box of Epsom salts out of the medicine shelf and poured a liberal amount into the steaming water. Then he undressed and slid in. He soaked lazily for over an hour.

Slater came out of the tub feeling better—not whole, but better. He forced himself to exercise gently—toe touches, back bends, pushups, a few situps—very few. Then he dressed, went into the kitchen and had a tuna sandwich. He followed that with two aspirins.

Lunch out of the way, he went to the couch, raked the phone off the end table and onto his lap. He dialed Burney at Homicide.

"The hell you say!" Burney said after Slater explained about Kline's body and the beating he had received.

"You won't use my name on this, will you?" Slater asked.

"If running you in for a few days would keep you out of trouble, I might. Knowing you, you'd just start a riot down here. And as many cops that hate your guts, you'd think that beating you got last night was comparable to burping a baby."

"Thanks, Burn."

"You banged up bad, Ray?"

"Been worse. I'm still all in one piece—one sore piece. They were experts. It was a warning to lay off the Shutters case. Seems everybody is in on the deal except me. I'm banging my head against the wall—or was."

"Was?" Burney asked.

"Yeah. A thing about blondes is starting to get to me."

"You and all the guys I know. But what's that got to do with anything?"

"Not sure yet."

"Well, ta ta then. I'm off to check on the corpse."

They rang off.

Five minutes later, the phone sounded. Slater picked it up. "Hello."

"Mr. Slater, I must say, you sound rather grumpy." It was the whiskey-smooth voice of Mason.

"Any news yet?"

"No."

"That's too bad. I was really hoping for something by now. But I'll tell you what—the cops have buzzed off my tail for a while. I think you're directly responsible for that. They know you're on the case—and, *hey!*

Have you heard how those birds talk about you. Not a kind word from that Lieutenant Mires—not one."

"Come to the point." Slater spoke irritably.

"The point is, you may collect your fee."

Slater was silent for a moment. "I didn't know I'd done anything to earn it."

"Oh, yes. The cops are convinced that I'm dead serious about finding the killer. Why else would I pay a private detective such an outrageous price. I'm giving you the whole fee now. You've done more than enough."

"And the murderer?"

"Nothing to me," Mason said. "It's like I told you. I don't want to take the rap for someone else's strangling. If the heat's off me, I hope he does get away. Know what I mean?"

"I know exactly," Slater said. "When do I collect the fee?"

"Any time," Mason replied. "Any time. You name it."

"How about tonight?"

"Splendid," Mason said. "Say eight?"

"Fine. But one thing . . ." Slater sounded almost apologetic. "Can you send those goons over to pick me up. It was kind of hard for me to keep my mind on the landmarks with old skinhead holding a gun on me. Tends to make a man nervous. I'm not sure I can find my way out."

Mason chuckled. "Certainly. No problem. I'll send . . . my goons as you call them . . . for you." Mason chuckled again. "They'll be there a little before eight. It's about a thirty-minute drive, I believe."

"Yeah. Well, that's great. I'll be waiting."

They hung up.

Slater got up and started with the exercise again. This time, his execution of the calisthenics was more ruthless. He had to work out some of the soreness and like now. Before eight, he had to be ready, had to be a man who could move fast if he had to.

He alternated between hot Epsom-salt baths and exercises until six. At six, he took a cold shower, dressed in jeans and a sweatshift, tied on some grungy tennis shoes without socks, then went into the kitchen for a dinner of roast beef on rye and a glass of milk. Next on the agenda was preparation. Slater had a plan.

In the garage, he dug out his battered old aluminum ladder from beneath a rusted car wheel and a mildewed tarp, leaned against the garage wall. On top of a box full of oil cans—full ones, the Chevy burned about two quarts a day—was a sheet fragment from which he tore rags. He tore some now, but not for checking and putting in oil. He laid the strips on top of the oil box when he was finished.

Under his set of weights and

toolbox, he found the old dufflebag he had bought at Goodwill and never used. He used it now. He coiled the mildewed tarp and stuffed it inside the bag, picked it up, opened the garage door and took it out to the Chevy, deposited it in the backseat.

He went back through the garage into the little laundry room, plucked the laundry bag off the nail on the door, stuffed it with dirty clothes from the hamper and put it in the back seat with the duffle.

That done, he went back into the garage and found two loops of thirty-foot clothesline. Back before the dryer—lack of a dryer was a constant complaint of his ex-wife—the cords had been strung in the back yard. Now he had a dryer and no wife. Maybe there was a lesson in that, he thought.

He coiled the cords in large loose loops and put them with the strips of cloth. Then he nailed an old, paint-splattered sawhorse back together, put it on the least-cluttered side of the garage and drove two nails into its top, near the center and approximately four inches apart.

Laying the hammer aside, he went to his bedroom, got his double-barreled shotgun out of the closet, cleaned and oiled it, put it on top of the dresser. He got four shotgun shells out of the top dresser drawer, put two in his pocket. With his pocket-

knife, set about uncrimping the ends of the other two.

He took the uncrimped shells into the bathroom, poured their contents—powder and shot—into the john and flushed it. He closed up the ends of the shells so that they looked untampered with. He traded them for the real ones in his pocket, and loaded the gun with those.

He checked his watch. Seven-fifteen.

Shotgun in hand, he went out through the sliding glass doors at the rear of the living room, through the backyard, out the redwood-fence gate and around to the side of the house. He held the shotgun close to his side. It wasn't completely dark, but the night was growing.

Alongside the house, up to the edge of the front yard, a row of unruly hedges grew. The last time they had been clipped was eight years ago, the last year of his marriage. The way Slater saw it, he had clipped his last goddam shrub.

He eased in amongst the rambling hedgery and sat down with the shotgun in his lap. The greenery, coupled with the ever-hastening night, concealed him.

SUNLIGHT had long fled when Hoover and Kelsey parked in Slater's drive, got out and went up to the door. Hoover was punching the bell when Slater came out of hiding, shotgun leveled.

"Easy," the detective said. "Or you two will be able to go in through the keyhole."

The pair made an instinctive move for the guns, but the clicking back of the double hammers and the double business end of it froze them.

"Good," Slater said. "But keep reaching, and toss 'em on the grass." Reluctantly, they did as they were told. "Now come this way." The detective added encouragement to his suggestion by waving the barrel of the shotgun a bit. "Open the garage."

They did, and with Slater behind them, went inside. Slater closed the garage door, hoping no neighbors had seen what had taken place.

"Now, Hoover," Slater said. "That clothesline." He nodded at the looped cord atop the oil. "Take one of those and tie Kelsey's hands behind his back, tight like." Slater produced a pocket-knife from his pocket and tossed it to Hoover. "Use that, and don't waste cord, and make it good because I'm going to check."

Frowning, Hoover opened the pocket-knife and set to work. When he was finished, Slater said, "Now you—on your stomach."

Hoover complied. Slater put his knee in the center of Hoover's back and pulled the man's hands behind him, bound them with some of the cord. He put the

knife away, dug the Caddy keys out of Hoover's pocket.

Slater tied the uncut cord to the cut cord with a sheetbend knot, ran the end through Hoover's and Kelsey's bonds. He got up, pulling the cord taut, went to the ladder, leaned the shotgun against the wall, put the ladder up in the center of the garage. Still holding the cord, he started up the ladder. He draped it over one of the garage door's runners and let the loose end drop to the floor.

He climbed down and recovered the shotgun, took hold of the end of the line, went to the sawhorse and looped the cord around one of the nails. He picked the sheet fragments up and went back to Hoover and Kelsey, gagged them and returned to the sawhorse. The bound pair watched with confused, straining eyes.

Slater broke open the shotgun, took out the shells, said, "Safety first, boys." He dropped the shells in his pocket, put the unloaded shotgun between the two nails on the sawhorse and using the hammer, bent them over the barrel so that they held the gun in place.

He broke the gun open again, reached in his pocket and brought out the two dummy shotgun shells. He loaded the gun with those. Carelessly, he pushed the barrel down level with the pair, lined it up. He picked up the

hammer and pounded on the nails. Hoover and Kelsey winced.

"Uh-huh," Slater said. "That moving business has got to stop. You see?" He took hold of the clothesline he had draped over the nail and tugged tight, "I'm attaching this to the triggers of the gun here. A good sharp tug"—Slater grinned widely enough to wet both ears, added loudly—"and *BLOOIE*!"

He laughed to himself. They couldn't know that all the movement in the world and the worst that could happen was that the hammers would fall on dummy shells. More probably, the sawhorse would turn over.

Already, Hoover and Kelsey were sweating pearls.

Slater reached over and cocked the hammers back on the shotgun. You could almost hear the gagged pair worry. "Make yourselves comfortable," he said. "Maybe I'll be back."

He went outside, closed the garage door and left them to their worries. Outside, he collected Hoover's and Kelsey's guns, put them beneath the seat in his Chevy, got his own .38 out of the glovebox along with the clip holster, and put it on underneath his sweatshirt. He got the duffle and laundry bags out of the back seat and loaded them in the Caddy.

Then he got behind the wheel, started it up, backed out and headed for Gulf City.

VII

SLATER HAD LIED to Mason. He could have found Mason's estate blindfolded. He had kept the route in mind in spite of Kelsey and his gun, and now he followed it.

It was a black night, moonless. It wouldn't hurt, thought Slater—the darker the better. By the time he hit the dirt road that led out to Mason's property, it seemed as if another brush-stroke of darkness had been painted on the night. Not even a star winked.

Slater rolled down his window and let the wind hit him in the face. He thought about the alligators, the dogs and a beast of a man called Eclipse. He shook off an involuntary chill. He didn't have to do this alone. He could always call Lt. Mires or, better yet, go at it through Burney in Pasadena. Burney had connections.

But no—this was personal. It had to be done this way. There was a little, foolish matter called principle involved. Silly, perhaps, but somehow it mattered to him. Hell if he knew why.

The wall that surrounded the Mason estate came into view, a ribbon of brick running along at the edge of the road. In the headbeams it looked as formidable as the ancient wall of China.

Slater followed it up to the wood and iron gates, turned in before them. He put the Caddy in

DRIVE, leaned over the seat and got the dufflebag, set it on the passenger's side in front. He arranged the laundry bag in back upright on the seat. They looked about as much like people as two volleyballs.

But it was dark, and Eclipse wouldn't be expecting anything unusual, would be busy with the dogs. It might work.

And it might not.

If not, there was always the .38. Slater didn't want to resort to that, but would if need be. He had before.

He put the Caddy back in gear, reached under the dash and felt out the button that controlled the gates' electric eye. He had watched Hoover closely. It was the one on the left. The one on the right worked the wrought iron gate before the mansion.

The huge gates swung open. Slater drove inside and, behind him, they closed with a solid finality. The twisting road was short. He was before the wrought-iron gates much too soon. But there was no turning back now. He flicked the button on the right. The gates opened and he drove inside, closed them behind him. He killed the engine and sat, hand under his sweatshirt on the .38.

The dogs came out slobbering, growling menacingly. They were little more than dark noise-making shapes in the velvety black of night.

Would his bundles fool Eclipse?
Only if he's dead and half blind, thought Slater, *or pre-occupied.*

But it was all academic now. Eclipse, a dislodged portion of the night, clothed all in black, loomed up suddenly, leash in hand. He fastened up one of the dogs, took him away.

So far, so good. Slater licked his lips.

A moment later Eclipse returned, took away the other Doberman. Slater got out of the car, closed the door. He went around on the other side, opened both doors quickly, shut them. Perhaps an unnecessary touch, but then again it might give him another moment without suspicion, a slight edge. Wasn't that all the old time gunfighters ever asked for—a slight edge?

Slater went up to the house and boldly through the front door. He went through the armor-and-weapon-decorated room, on into the room where Mason and his taxidermy collection resided.

Mason, wearing a purple cowboy shirt with gold snaps at the pockets and at the shirt's front, sat behind the desk, puffing his pipe. A little metal box was in front of him. He had the lid up. His head jerked when he saw the detective. The smile that was almost on his face slid off to the left, dangled, dropped. Slater was carrying his .38 and it was pointed at the little man.

"Hoover . . . Kelsey?" Mason said.

"They got tied up."

Mason's face seemed uncertain on expression, so it settled on blandness. Slater went over to the desk and turned the little metal box around. It was full of bills.

"Ah!" Slater said. "A lettuce crisper and it's full."

"Nine more of them are yours," Mason said hoarsely.

Slater smiled, said, "Just nine?"

"Take more," Mason squeaked. "Take what you want!" He pushed the box closer to Slater with his fingertips.

Slater shook his head. "I don't want your money."

Mason's tongue darted out of the corner of his mouth, licked off a few beads of sweat. "What do you want?"

Slater showed him the smile again. "Your ass! Before Eclipse rambles in to join us, I'm going to tell you something straight and simple. Or shall we wait on Eclipse. I got a suspicion he might find this interesting."

For a moment, Mason's bravado returned. "By all means, go on with it."

VIII

SLATER PULLED his wallet out of his jean pocket, flipped it open with one hand, put it on the desk top. He eased a bill out of it. It was a crisp thousand.

"I'm returning this. It has an odor and it keeps clinging. Spending it won't help. It'll haunt me then. Washing in tomato juice won't help. It's got your kind of stink on it and that doesn't come clean."

Mason turned his head from side to side, like a dog in obedience school who has just been asked to perform a command it hasn't learned yet. "Say what?"

"Why don't you have Pam Shutters' head on your wall?"

Mason chewed his bottom lip. "I think you've flipped."

"You tried to use me, play me for a patsy.— You killed her, Mason. Or rather had it done. Eclipse probably. I mean he's the man for the job—efficient, merciless."

"You can't prove a thing," Mason said.

"Oh yeah? You see," Slater lied, "those two turkeys of yours are ready to gobble."

"They don't know a thing."

"Sure they don't. I know some things to go with what they have to say. You hired me as a screen. Used my reputation—whatever that is. The cops know I'm efficient . . . and honest. I wasn't so sure about myself for a while there. That ten thousand haunted me like Morley's ghost. I tried to tell myself that I thought you were innocent. You just made too many mistakes."

"Like saying Pam was blonde for instance. According to

someone who should know, an ex-boyfriend, she had just turned blonde, or at least he had only seen her blonde briefly. First time I talked to you, you said something about her pretty blonde head. That could only mean you had seen her recently, had had your men keeping an eye on her.

"And there was Kline, old stoolie Kline. He got the straight story and wanted to lay it on me for twenty and, my guess is, a little extra thing called protection. That's why he was lying low. He knew you were after him. Nail you and he might be safe. Of course it didn't help Pam."

"I'd have gotten him anyway," Mason said. "Just like I'll get you."

"You played it dumb for such an alleged pro, Mason. Sending your gorillas around to thump on me. Bad play. It was Eclipse who did the slamming wasn't it?"

Mason didn't answer. He just sat there with his hands folded in his lap. He looked like a lizard sunning itself on a rock.

"Yeah it was him," the detective said. "A little discouragement. You hire me, then hamper me. And that's when you laid another tidbit on me, after the beating. You called and said you didn't want to take credit for someone else's strangling. Only the cops, and me knew it was really a strangle job, one that sliced the head damn near off.

It sure wasn't in the newspaper article you showed me. They call it a throat-cutting."

"Clever," Mason said. "But will it hold water?"

"Yeah. It'll hold. Last but not least was that quick decision that I'd done a fine job and you were going to lay the rest of the money on me. You figued to buy me out of the case. The cops were off your back, and if I had any suspicions I'd keep my mouth shut so I could hang onto my loot, and keep your animals off of me. You're going to pay, Mason—Pay dearly."

Mason was suddenly very, very smug. "I don't think so."

Slater realized his mistake just in time. He had been too wrapped up in chiding Mason, too full of revenge. Now a thin, dark wire was already looping over his head and coming hard for his throat; a wire that could slice through his flesh like a guillotine; a wire wielded by a soft-walking black goliath named Eclipse.

Instinctively, Slater jerked up his right hand, the one with the .38 in it. The wire caught the revolver just above the chamber, on the barrel, slammed it back into the detective's face, tore the flesh beneath his nose, but the wire was chewing metal, not flesh.

Slater slipped his finger from the trigger guard. Wouldn't do to blow off his own nose off. He couldn't turn his head to aim

his stomp, so when he kicked back with his heel he missed the first time. On the second effort he connected with Eclipse's shin and raked down to the giant's instep, stomped the man's foot with all his might.

Eclipse made a sound like an excited pig, relaxed his grip. Slater slammed his left elbow into the man's gut, pushed forward with the .38 against the wire with sudden, explosive effort. The wire snapped out of Eclipse's hand, but the .38 flipped away with it, slid across the floor like a scuttling rat.

Slater turned and started a left hook at the black mountain's rocklike head.

It never got there.

Eclipse was a blur. His foot shot out sideways and caught Slater in the chest, picked him up and sent him over the desk and into Mason. The detective went end over end, overturned the chair and crunched down on the little, freckle-face man.

"*Kill him!*" Mason screamed from beneath the detective.

"*Kill him, Eclipse!*" He pushed from beneath Slater, rolled . . . and then the air above the detective was full of moving darkness, a mass so large it nearly blotted out the overhead lights. It was Eclipse.

Slater followed Mason's lead, rolled in the opposite direction. Eclipse cleared the desk effortlessly, landed hard on both feet.

The floor shook. A lion's head leaped off the wall.

Coming to his feet, the groggy detective leaned against the wall beneath a Cape Buffalo's head. Eclipse looked at him and grinned a bloodthirsty grin.

The black panther stalked.

But the cornered prey moved!

As Eclipse closed the gap, Slater leaped straight up, clasped a hand on each of the Cape Buffalo's horns. The leap carried him about a foot off the floor and as gravity did its trick, Slater arched his body and jerked with all his might. The head came loose from the wall, Slater went down, lit on his heels and bent at the waist, sent the heavy, horned head flying.

Eclipse's foot came up, swept to the outside, slapped the grisly trophy away. He made for the detective. His foot shot out like a piston. Slater, burly as he was, was supple. He moved aside of the foot, caught a glancing blow in the ribs.

Nonetheless, he felt a bone snap. A fractured rib jabbed at his skin, tried to force its way out. Nausea climbed up him like a crab. He fought it down and, broken rib and all, leaped and rolled.

He came up in front of the desk, staggered to it and leaned with his left hand out against it. Slater looked for the gun. Mason still lay on the floor. His eyes were wide and he licked his lips

in anticipation of the detective's brutal demise.

Eclipse was three feet away.

Slater let his knees sag, his eyes half-roll up in his head. His right hand dipped loosely into the sand of the elephant-paw ashtray. It seemed a weak, unconscious gesture.

Eclipse swallowed up the distance between them.

Slater's hand clutched a handful of sand, his body twisted. With a flicking motion he tossed the sand, hit Eclipse in the face and eyes.

The giant stumbled back.

Slater knew he had but an instant. He scooped up the heavy, elephant-paw ashtray, turned with it and, using it like a battering ram and ignoring the pain of his broken rib, smashed Eclipse in the knee with it. He put everything he had into that blow.

The giant's knee made a cracking sound. He screamed. Crumpling, his knee a wreck, he supported himself on his palms and his uninjured knee. Slater kicked the giant in the face with all his might.

Eclipse's head shot up, and when he came down it wasn't on his palms. He crashed to the carpet, unconscious.

Breathing hard, the corkscrew in his ribs drilling for a way out, Slater leaned against the desk. He looked for Mason. Mason was gone.

X

MOVING AS fast as his broken rib would permit, Slater went over to the .38, picked it up. The instant Eclipse fell, Mason had panicked.

There was a door half open at the back. Slater concluded that it had to indicate the route of Mason's hasty departure. Slater followed cautiously. Pressing one hand to his rib, holding the .38 with the other, he entered a hall of dark tile. There were no doors, only a stairway of polished, black walnut with a tongue of crimson carpet lapping down the steps.

At the top of the stairs, wearing a thin coat of shadow, next to the rail on the right, was a huge red clay pot. The sort that one of the Forty Thieves might have hidden away in. At the moment a rubber plant occupied that space.

Opposite the pot, on the left side of the rail, stood a knight's armor, complete with halberd. It seemed to guard the landing. Slater started up. He was halfway up the stairs when the clay pot started down.

The pot, sturdy as it was, made three stairs before exploding in a shower of clay fragments, rubber-tree pulp and black dirt. Slater leaned hard against the rail. Damp black dirt splashed him, a rubbery limb slapped his legs and a pot fragment hit him in the forehead.

When the shower had passed and the pot fragments had tinkled

their last on the tile below, Slater started up again. He noticed that the knight's halberd was gone. Mason's panic had passed.

At the top of the landing only he and the knight stood. A hall led off down a narrow corridor bordered by doors. One of the doors was half open, the last on the left.

Slater moved silently. The pain in his ribs was a dull throb. His ears were keyed for sound—the soft slide of shoes on crimson carpet, the deadly whispering of a swinging halberd.

He made it to the half-open door without sudden decapitation. He stood sweating before it. With a quick kick of his foot he parted the opening more. He didn't see Mason.

Sometimes you had to take chances, he told himself. Sometimes you had to be tough. You were supposed to be tough.

Coiling, he leaped into the room, belly down, the broken rib side up. He hit, rolled, came up with the .38. His ribs hurt like hell, his face was damp with pain, but no one stood waiting. The room was empty.

Slater inspected the room. Lavish, red and gold curtains, slightly parted, fluttered in the breeze. He walked softly to the edge of the curtains, took hold of the cord there and jerked it, leaped back with the .38 ready.

The wind was there to greet

him. The landing was empty, except for the head of the halberd hanging over the top of the rail. Slater went out on the landing and looked over the rail.

Mason was climbing into the Cadillac. He had used the halberd to lower himself from the landing to the ground. The car keys would be no problem. Mason would have his own set.

The Caddy's motor growled. Lights came on. Mason began turning the sleek car around, setting it to face the gates. Slater jammed the .38 in its holster and, before he would let himself reconsider, palmed himself over the rail. It was a pretty good drop, but he coiled his legs to make the impact. It sent shock waves through his broken rib. Bone pushed through the skin. Slater willed himself against the pain, put his brain on rote.

The car was turned about. The gates began to swing open. Slater started to run. He came up on the driver's side before Mason saw him. The window he had rolled down was still down.

Mason caught sight of Slater out of the corner of his eye, but before he could stomp the gas, the detective's right leg came up, and the foot on the end of it shot through the window and caught Mason a stomping blow on the forehead.

Mason's head rocked back, but he took the kick well enough. Slater's leg slipped back over

Mason's head and the backseat, lodged, forced the detective up on the toe of his uncaptured leg. Slater swung in against the Caddy, grabbed the outside mirror with his left hand for support, reached for his .38 with the other.

Mason stomped the accelerator! The car lurched forward like a thing alive. Scrambling for a hold, Slater lost the .38 to the ground. He coiled his leg up beneath him, but the sudden acceleration of the vehicle, his weight working against him, Slater's lodged leg gave way with a crack. He let out a bellow. It had snapped below the knee and a river of fire was flowing from it in both directions to his foot and to his hip.

Slater clung.

Mason swung out of the window with his left hand clenched in a hammerlike fist. He tried to strike Slater in the groin. Slater's right hand grabbed at the wheel. The Caddy weaved far to the left. Mason shrieked, grabbed at the wheel, fought against the strong right hand of the detective.

The car swayed back to the left a bit. Swamp water loomed on either side of them. Slater put all he had into it. Jerked the wheel out of Mason's grasp, made the car wheel left.

Black swamp water and twisting limbs full of moss were suddenly before them.

Slater tried to jerk the car back on the road.

Mason made a strangled noise in his throat.

For an instant, the car seemed to fly. A willow, growing fast, spread moss-tangled fingers before them. The Caddy hit the swamp like a skipping stone, slid half-submerged well out into the water and then, like an anvil, it went down. Mason inside, Slater clinging.

The detective had managed to gulp in one deep lungful of air before going down. The water pulled at him like ice. *Down, down, down, and fast...*

With both hands, Slater worked his wrecked leg free, pushed off from the plunging car he could feel but could not see and, with rapid strokes of his arms, kicking with his uninjured leg, he started for the surface.

He broke water, gulped in great lungfuls of air. He clung momentarily to a jagged, rotting stomp. Below him he could feel the tugging movement of the water as the Caddy sank to the bottom. After a moment it stopped.

Taking in some slow controlled breaths, Slater pushed off from the stump and swam painfully for shore. He crawled up on the bank, dragged himself over the mushy soil and onto the road. His leg and side seethed with pain. Blood from a wound he did not remember acquiring, ran down from his left hip and

mingled with the water in his pants leg and shoe.

Lifting himself on one elbow, he looked out over the water.

Like a polaris missile, Mason surfaced. Half of his body rose above the water, settled back into the hungry swamp with a loud splash. Mason gasped, started for the stump Slater had just recently deserted.

A log came drifting slowly in his direction. Mason turned for it instead.

The log had teeth . . . lots of them . . .

The alligator was a flash of darkness against murky, churning water. Mason lifted his head from his swimming in time to see great jaws descending. He tried to scream, but it was too late for that.

The alligator's teeth caught Mason at the chin and the top of the head. Bone crunched, then, with a whip of its leathery tail, the reptile took its snack below.

Splashes settled, rippled gently across the water's surface, and then only the wind moved the water.

Slater looked toward the Gothic manor. Its lights were as hazy as distant fireflies. There was a phone there and he could call the police.

It was a long way to crawl and he was losing a lot of blood, getting weaker by the second, but he thought he could make it . . .

All The Way

Home

JAMES M. REASONER



Markham's job was to bring Falcone's eloping daughter back to her mob chief father. Which proved not to be as easy as it looked.

I PUT THE GUN against Jack alive."

Parker's forehead as soon as he opened the door and said:

"You yell and I won't have one damn reason for keeping you

His eyes got big until I could see white all the way around the irises, but he kept his mouth shut.

"Back up," I told him. "Slow!"

He moved backwards awkwardly, bumping a leg against the bed. I kept the gun right where it was. He could see that the pressure of my thumb holding back the hammer was all that kept it from going off and scattering his brains all over the motel room.

I could hear the shower running through the half-open bathroom door. "Is Janet in there?" I asked him, keeping my voice pitched low.

He had to swallow twice before he could say, "Y-yes."

I flicked my eyes around the room, taking it in, knowing that the shower cutting off would warn me before Janet came out.

It was a typical motel room, built like a cardboard box. The bedspread was frayed, the carpet had burn holes in it and the single rabbit ear on the little black-and-white TV had a gob of aluminum foil stuck on the end. I'd spent a lot of nights in rooms just like it.

"All right," I said, "who's got the book, you or her?"

"B-book? I don't have any book. Who are you?" A note of belligerence started to creep into his voice. "What the hell is —"

I jerked my eyes back to his and moved my thumb on the hammer. "—this?" He finished limply.

"My name is Markham." I didn't see any harm in telling him that. "I've been hired to take Janet home."

The shower was still running.

She must've felt awfully dirty . . .

Again, I asked, "Where's the book?" I was concentrating on Jack's face and almost missed the flicker of movement from the bathroom door. I turned my head in that direction, and that was a mistake.

Something wet slapped across my face and wrapped itself around my head. I couldn't see. A weak punch bounced off my belly.

I didn't want a lot of noise. I let the hammer down gently so the gun wouldn't fire, then slashed through the air in front of me with it. It connected with something soft that let out a yelp.

Something else landed on my back, something that was wet and slippery and mad as hell. I tried to grab it. Little fists kept hitting me in the head.

I tripped and went to one knee. I used the fall to tip the weight on my back up and over and off. It landed on the bed with a squeal and the sound of springs popping.

I finally managed to claw the soggy towel away from my eyes and said, "Now hold it!"

Janet Falcone was sprawled out on the bed, trying to cover herself with the spread. Jack was lying on the floor crying, the gash on his cheek that my gun had opened up leaking on the carpet.

I sighed. "Miss Falcone, I think you're more trouble than you're worth."

She began cursing and I stood there and took it for about two

minutes. When I thought it had gone on long enough, I leaned over and slapped her. That shut her up for a second, then she started to cry, too. This was getting more depressing by the minute.

"Okay, listen," I said. "My name is Markham. I'm a private investigator and I've been hired by your father to find you and bring you home. He's also interested in recovering a book he thinks you may have taken. Things will be a lot easier all the way around if you'll cooperate."

She looked up at me with tears streaming down her face and wailed, "I don't want to go home."

Jack had struggled up into a sitting position, looking more like a scared little boy than ever. "Why can't you leave us alone?" he asked between sobs. "Why can't *he* leave us alone? Don't we have any rights?"

"Nobody pays me to debate. You knew what you were getting into when you ran off with Falcone's daughter."

"You know what he is, don't you?" the girl said. "He's *scum!* He's a *murderer!* How can you work for a man like him?"

"That's funny. He told me he was a legitimate businessman." This had gone on long enough. I said, "Look, your father wants you home. I'm going to take you home. He wants that book back, too, so you'd better have it. Now

put some clothes on and let's go."

Her tears had dried up and a different look came onto her face. She let the bedspread slip quite a bit and said, "Can't we work something out?"

"*Janet!*" Jack was shocked.

I kept the grim look on my face and smiled inside. Keeping my voice flat, I said, "If you think a wet, skinny, nineteen-year-old is going to seduce me, you're way off base, kid."

I stepped over to the door of the little bathroom and reached inside to cut off the shower. The sleeve of my coat got wet. The window was small and high, and besides, it was nailed shut. I said, "Okay, you can dress in here."

Janet got up, leaving the bedspread where it was, and marched across the room, her face full of anger. She slammed the door behind her.

I put my gun up and stepped to the window, not too worried about turning my back on Jack. He hadn't proved to be any great danger, and the only reason I had been so tough with him at first was because he was an unknown quantity.

The car that the two of them had run away in was parked just outside. It was a little red sports job, bought for Janet by her father. I knew I'd probably have to go through it looking for the book. I didn't think Janet would volunteer it.

I was wrong. She came out of

the bathroom behind me and said, "Here! You might as well take it now. I'm sure Daddy's a lot more interested in it than he is in me."

I took the little black leather-bound book. "I'm glad you decided to be smart."

"If I was smart, I'd shoot myself."

She had put on jeans and a light blue tee shirt and had sandals on her feet. She wasn't a bad-looking kid, but she was so young I felt a hundred years old. I said, "Don't talk like that."

"Does it bother you?"

"Anything that's a waste bothers me."

She sniffed and tried to look like she was ignoring me. I said, "Get your stuff packed. It's a long drive."

All she had was one suitcase. I put it in the sports car's tiny trunk. Jack Parker followed us out of the room and said, "What about me?"

"Falcone's not interested in getting you back. I'd say you're on your own." I opened the passenger door of the car and said to Janet, "Get in. I'll drive."

"You sure you can handle it?"

"I'll manage."

"Don't you have a car?"

"It's rented. I'll call the company later and tell them where they can pick it up."

"You think of everything, don't you?"

"I try."

She shut up. We pulled out of

the parking lot, leaving Jack to stare after us. I threaded my way through the early evening Phoenix traffic and headed west toward home. I was glad we'd be making most of the trip at night.

When we were on the edge of town, she said, "How did you find us?"

"Next time don't run away in a fancy red car."

"How much is my father paying you to drag me back?"

"That's between him and me."

"You just don't want me to know how mercenary you are."

"You make the word sound a lot dirtier than it really is. There's nothing wrong with working for wages."

"There is if that's all you care about."

I didn't reply to that, and she drew back in a corner to sulk awhile. I had to concentrate on keeping the speed down. Flat open road and a fast car is a combination that can get out of control.

Since Janet was staying quiet, I turned on the radio and found a station that played Errol Garner and Dave Brubeck. I don't think she liked my choice of music, but I didn't really care.

It was dark by now. Traffic was light, and if circumstances had been different, I might've been enjoying myself. I've always liked night driving.

This night, though, there was an ache along my shoulders and the

back of my neck. There were places on the steering wheel that felt greasy under my fingers. I would be glad to turn Janet over to her father and get this case over with.

That's what I was thinking when all of a sudden she said, "What if he kills me?"

"What?"

"What if he's mad enough to kill me? Frank Falcone has killed people before when he lost his temper. Oh, he tried to keep things like that from his precious innocent daughter, but I've heard stories. I've heard lots of stories."

So had I. I knew Falcone had come west from Brooklyn in the late Forties. He was a young man then. He had started at the bottom, but his rise in the Organization had been steady, if unspectacular. I knew his past had been about as unsavory as it could get, but that was none of my business. To me, he was just a client.

"After all, I stole his precious book," Janet was continuing. "I thought when money ran low I could sell it back to him. Did he tell you what was in it?"

"I didn't ask."

"It's his own personal diary of his glorious career. My father's a vain man, Markham. He had to keep a record of all his accomplishments, all the killings and corruption, all the details of his business. I found it and read it three weeks ago. That's when I

decided to run away with Jack."

"Why him?" I heard myself asking.

"Why a nobody like Jack Parker, you mean? He was just somebody I met at USC. He was handy, he didn't work for my father, and I didn't have any trouble getting him to go along with whatever I wanted."

"Just a nice, boring patsy, right? You'd have dumped him inside a week."

She turned her head and stared out the window at the passing darkness.

It wasn't long afterwards that I noticed the headlights in the mirror.

They were keeping a constant distance behind us. That meant they didn't care if I knew they were there. Confidence like that worries me.

I eased the gas pedal down and watched the speedometer creep up past 70. The lights stayed in the same position. I said softly, "Damn!"

"What's wrong?"

"Somebody's following us."

She slumped down in her seat. "Should I not turn around?"

"You've seen too many TV shows. I don't imagine it'll make a hell of a lot of difference what you do."

I had us going over 80 by now. They had picked a good stretch of road, flat and straight and not much traffic in the middle of the night.

"How fast will this thing go?" I asked.

"I've had it up to 110."

"We'll need it."

I was hoping we could outrun them. There was enough gas in the tank for another hundred and fifty miles. I doubted that their car could stay with us that long.

Janet started talking about anything and everything. She told me about her childhood, about her mother's death, about being raised by a succession of governesses and tutors. Her father had been busy with his business, of course. She was nervous and the talking seemed to make her feel better, but it didn't do much for me.

I kept constant pressure on the accelerator, and it wasn't long before we were doing over one hundred mph. The following lights dropped back a little.

It was a long chase. Two hours later it was still going on, and I was beginning to worry about the gas. The gauge had slid down well below a quarter of a tank.

There had been no chance to get help. Towns in that part of the country are few and far between, and the small communities we had passed through had been dark and sleeping. It looked like it was only a matter of time until the gas gave out. Then they would have us.

Then we topped a little rise and flashed past a highway patrol car.

He hit his lights and siren and came after us. If I had been the praying type, I would have sent a

few words of thanksgiving heavenward.

The cop had our pursuers cut off, and he couldn't catch us either. I saw the other car dropping way, way back when they spotted the lights of the patrol car.

The cop gave up after a little while and I knew we had some breathing room. I remembered an all-night truck stop just a few miles farther down the road. We could fill up there and be quick about it.

I asked Janet, "Do you have any idea who that could have been?"

"Not unless it was some of Daddy's thugs."

"He hired me to bring you back. He wouldn't have any reason to send someone after us."

"Maybe he's afraid you read the book. Maybe he wants to eliminate everyone who knows about it."

It was farfetched, but it was a possibility. Just because I was determined to play square with Frank Falcone didn't mean he would play square with me.

"Would Jack come after you?"

She laughed. "Not likely. You scared him too badly. He likes things easy."

I saw the brightly lit bays of the truck stop and cafe at the side of the road up ahead. There hadn't been any sign of the people who had been chasing us earlier. We had to have gas, so there wasn't any choice but to stop.

I pulled off the highway and came to a stop beside one of the gas pumps. There was another car parked in front of the cafe, and two big eighteen-wheelers off to the side. I cut the engine off and said, "You want some coffee or something?"

Janet didn't say anything, just got out and stalked toward the cafe. I got out, too, and looked around for the attendant. It looked like I was going to have to pump my own gas. Nobody was stirring around the place.

When I had the tank full, I put the cap back on and headed for the cafe. I pushed through the glass door and looked around for Janet.

A gun barrel cracked into the back of my head.

I went to my knees, trying to make some sense out of the rainbow of colors that was suddenly swirling in my brain. Something bumped into my face. I realized a second later that it was the floor.

I dimly heard some shouting and commotion, but for a minute or so, it was all I could do just to lay there and breathe. When the world stopped spinning backwards, I raised my head and peered around blearily.

I was lying just inside the door. Tables covered the area on both sides of me, and there were booths around the walls. A long counter with stools in front of it ran along the back wall. Like the motel earlier, it was a typical

piece of roadside Americana . . .

. . . except that there were men with guns surrounding me.

There was a knot of people clustered in one of the booths, among them a frightened Janet. There were also two waitresses, a cook, a teenage boy, two truck drivers and a man in a rumpled suit who looked like a salesman. A big man was covering the whole bunch with a pistol.

There were three other armed men standing around me looking grim. They were waiting for orders.

The man who would give the orders if any were to be given was sitting on a stool at the counter, turned around so that he faced out into the room. He was slim and well-dressed, with hair and eyes the color of high grade steel. Standing beside him was a very nervous Jack Parker.

"You must be Markham," the man said.

I got my hands under me, then my knees and finally my feet. I was wobbly but upright when I said, "I'm Markham. Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Wilson; if that's important. I'd like to hire you."

Jack was looking at me with slitted eyes and open mouth. The cut on his face was red and swollen. He said, "Why don't you just kill him, Mr. Wilson?"

"Because we don't want any more unpleasantness than is necessary. I know he interfered

with our plans, but there's no need to be vindictive."

"That's right, Jack," I said. "Now what is it you want to hire me to do, Wilson?"

"I want you to turn Miss Falcone and the book she took from her father over to me. I'll pay more than whatever Falcone offered."

"Why?"

"I don't see any harm in telling you. Falcone and I are business rivals, you could say. With the knowledge that his journal will provide and the safety of his daughter to use as leverage, I think I can eliminate him as competition."

"So when Janet ran away with Jack, she was playing into his hands, instead of the other way around, like she thought."

"That's right." Jack sneered.

"I wasn't talking to you," I said, adding a name that made him turn white and clench his fists.

I could see tears running down Janet's face, shining in the harsh glare of the fluorescent lights. I couldn't help feeling sorry for her. She was a spoiled brat, but she was also a disillusioned child and now a pawn in a game of killers. There had to be something I could do.

"I guess it was your guys chasing us earlier," I said. "I figured we were all right once we shook them."

"They stopped and called

ahead," Wilson said. "We knew you'd be needing gas."

I was running all my possible courses of action through my head and rejecting them one by one. Any kind of grandstand play would just get me shot that much sooner. And I didn't have any rosy optimism about my eventual fate if I cooperated with Wilson, either.

As things stood, there wasn't a damn thing I could do.

"Which one of you has the book, Markham?" Wilson asked.

I thought I saw a small opening. "Neither one of us," I said. "It's out in the car. I can go get it." I hoped they wouldn't search me; the book was in my inside coat pocket.

Wilson smiled just slightly. "By yourself?" He spoke to one of his men. "You go with him. The girl stays in here."

The skin on my back crawled as I turned it to Wilson. I stepped back out onto the gravel parking lot, the gunman right behind me. I wished there had been some way to get Janet outside, too. Maybe I could cut down the odds a little, anyway.

The guy said, "No funny business. Just get the book."

"Sure, sure." I started to rummage around inside the car, making a show of looking for the book.

"Uh-oh."

I looked up when the gunman said that and saw him slipping his pistol inside his coat. A highway

patrol car was pulling off the highway. I couldn't be sure, but it looked like the one that had chased us earlier.

It came to a stop behind the sports car. Two officers got out and walked slowly toward us. They took a long look at the car, and one of them said to me, "You own this thing?"

"Well, you caught up with me," I said, laughing. "I thought for sure I had outrun you."

"It's not a laughing matter, sir. Let's see your license."

Wilson's man was looking confused. His orders hadn't covered this situation. As I handed my license to the officer, I shot a glance at the cafe. Through the windows, I could see Wilson standing tensely by the counter. He hadn't figured on the cops showing up, either.

"All right, Mr. Markham," the patrolman with my license said, "you have your auto registration?"

"Sure." I was hoping it would be in the glove compartment. I lucked out and it was. The patrolman looked at it and said, "This car's registered to a Janet Falcone. Who's she?"

"The brunette in there," I said, pointing at the cafe.

"I'll go get her," the other officer said. The first one took out his ticket book.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to pay a pretty stiff fine, Mr. Markham," he said.

Wilson's gunman was standing off to the side, fidgeting, afraid to act on his own initiative. We both watched as the other cop opened the cafe door and called Janet's name. She stood up hesitantly and stepped toward the door. I saw Wilson raise a hand, ready to turn his dogs loose.

The cop next to me was busy writing. The gunman was watching Wilson. I slipped my gun out of my pocket and fired.

The bullet shattered the big window and punched Wilson back against the counter. Janet squirted through the open door like a watermelon seed. I turned and kicked the gunman in the groin as hard as I could, smashing the gun against his head as he doubled over. He went down cold.

The cop was gaping at me in shock; I lowered a shoulder and bulled into him. We both fell to the ground behind the car as Wilson's men opened up.

I peeked around a tire and saw that Janet had had enough sense to know that she would never have made it to the car. She had run for the side of the building, and now she was crouched just around the corner, hands over her ears. None of Wilson's men had a shot at her from that angle.

The cop that had been at the door had gone the other way. He was at the other corner of the building, gun drawn. I was glad he had reacted quickly and not paused to ask questions.

The cop with me was screaming questions at me as I returned the fire from the cafe. I yelled over the noise, "They're gangsters; they're after that girl!"

He was young and scared, but he rolled over and pulled his gun and began shooting, too. I guess he believed me.

It could have developed into a pretty fierce firefight, what with three of them and three of us, if the other officer hadn't gone around behind the building and come in the back door. He got the drop on them and they gave it up. With their boss down, they decided it was better to quit before anybody else got killed.

Wilson was dead, Jack Parker wounded seriously. No one else in the building was hurt.

There were a lot of cops and a lot of questions before the night was over. The waitresses and the cook and the others backed up my story, and there wasn't much doubt about who the bad guys were. I got some stern lectures about endangering innocent citizens and some talk about a move to suspend my P.I.'s license, but that could be worried about later.

All things considered, Janet and I weren't too far behind schedule when we pulled up in front of Frank Falcone's mansion just after noon the next day. I stopped the car and handed the book to her. "You can give it to him," I said.

She took it and turned it over idly in her hands. She had been

acting differently since the violence at the truck stop. The arrogant kid was gone, replaced by a quiet, worried girl.

"You're not coming in?"

"Nope. Your old man's retainer more than covers my fee."

Her eyes flashed briefly. "Don't want to see the happy reunion you brought about, huh?" Then she looked away and went on, "I won't stay. Next time, I'll be smarter about it. I won't take anything my father values. There won't be any more Jack Parkers, either. But I won't stay here, Markham. You may have to come after me again."

"Not likely." I got out of the car. "Stay out of trouble, kid."

I didn't look back as I walked down the drive toward the street. I didn't want to see the scared, confused person I was leaving there. If she was ever going to make a place for herself, it wouldn't be in her father's house.

It was a week later that Frank Falcone called and told me his daughter was gone again. Would I be interested in finding her and bringing her back, since I had done such a good job last time?

"Not interested," I told him, and hung up. Janet had found the card I tucked into the book, and I had just put her on a plane for France. I could still see the bitter-sweet smile on her face.

I hoped she found what she was looking for this time. It's not often you get a second chance.

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The Pit of Time



FRANK SISK

Lambert was a bum, an alky, a floater whose memory was gone. But when his past returned to haunt him, he knew what not to do.

LATELY, HE WAS often uncertain of his direction, of destination, of season. Of his own name at times.

Lambert? The sound was right.

Lambert. Sure, that was it. But the name led to another uncertainty. Was it his first name or his last?

He sat on sun-scorched grass,

his back against a tree, pouring the last drops of warm vodka into his dry mouth from a tilted pint bottle. He was on the edge of a small town in some southeastern state, he wasn't sure which.

Georgia maybe. A thick heat leavened the air, causing it to rise and hang like another element, two feet above the black-top highway.

Or it could be Alabama?

Not that it mattered much. All that really mattered now was his constant companion, the rot-gut that fogged his brain, the endless swallow of forgetfulness.

He dropped the empty bottle beside an exposed root of the tree and got creakingly to his feet. Coins jingled in a pocket of his sagging pants, white ducks gone gray and threadbare with neglect and hard use.

He reached into a pocket, took out the coins, counted them aloud. The total exceeded expectations. He counted them again. The total was nearly the same.

"Good, good!" he muttered. Though unaware of it, he had been conversing intermittently with himself for the past year. "Wonder where I panhandled yesterday. Gold mine. Ought to go back."

He began shuffling toward the town. He kept to the withered verge. The torrid blacktop, an intuitive caution warned him,

would sear his sockless feet through the holes in the soles of his sneakers.

"Like the coals of hell," he told himself. "Fire and brimstone."

He met a teenage boy trundling a bicycle with a flat rear tire.

"Hey there, sonny." He began scratching at the chronic itch rooted in his peppery beard. "Could you point an old bo to a place that sells drink?"

The boy stopped and stared and finally spoke. "I cain't make out what yawl said."

Lambert was unaware of the state of his diction. Words, phrases, sentences, painstakingly formulated in his head, issued from his gap-toothed mouth as so much slurred gibberish. He wondered why he had to repeat the simplest question again and again before being understood—or misunderstood, as was generally the case.

"What's a matter, kid?" Lambert's boiled-looking eyes narrowed. "You too damn stupid to savvy plain English?"

The boy obviously found this utterance as incomprehensible as the first. He shrugged his bony shoulders, ready to move on.

With a mummer's gesture, Lambert detained him. Cupping his filthy right hand, he raised it to his lips, threw back his head and made a smacking sound. Down the hatch.

The boy grinned. "Real white mule—that what yawl want?"

Lambert nodded. "You finally caught on."

"Hear tell Archie Holden got real good mule. Cain't miss Archie. Short piece back." The boy turned to look down the street where he'd come from. "That's Archie's gas station. See his big ole sign right from cheer."

An hour, two hours, three hours later—who could ever be definite?—Lambert unerringly entered the region set aside as the town dump. The noxious effluvia of any burned-over dump were something he could always smell a mile away, and days after the event.

"A nose for refuse." The phrase pleased him. He said it again.

He stopped at the charred edge of a wide pit which stood in the middle of a few acres of barren land, its parched grittiness producing only a few scraggy bushes. From the pit rose the stench of incinerated putrefaction, of carrion cremated and quenched and again cremated.

Atop the accretion of slag, ash, scoria and soot were overlapping clumps of rubbish and garbage that had been deposited there since the last burning. Flies thronged in the peccant piles; rats roamed fearlessly. Maggots mortified the cast-off flesh of fish, fowl, dog, cat . . .

Holding a large paper bag

against his chest, Lambert surveyed this noisome domain with an uncritical if jaundiced eye. And, after a few moments, he set the bag on the ground between his feet and opened it.

He inspected the contents—a chunk of cheese and a half a loaf of rye bread mooched from a diner, an unlabeled quart bottle nearly full of whitish liquid, bought from a lout in a gas station. He lifted out the bottle (originally a receptacle for cider vinegar), unscrewed the cap and for the second time sampled its fiery favor. It blazed down his throat like flame from a blowtorch.

Between gasping for air and coughing he said, "Holy . . . Jesus! Good stuff . . . got a . . . kick like a damn ornery mule."

A moment later, he took another swallow, this time with no outward effect.

"Just takes getting used to," he advised himself, feeling the tingle of his veins. Recapping the bottle, he put it back in the bag.

A high-pitched scream—*killy killy killy*—cut through the late-afternoon stillness. He lifted his eyes. A sparrow hawk was hovering in the hazy air high above the pit. *Killy killy*—and it began a sharp descent.

It appeared to be diving directly at his head. He absorbed the bold approach with a gaze frozen

between fear and resignation. Then the bird veered to the left in a swift downward arc, glided miraculously just above the range of impedimenta protruding from the dump at variable levels, dipped suddenly and seized a small scampering creature, a mouse, to zoom gracefully upward over the ragged edge of the pit.

Riveted beside the paper bag, Lambert followed the flight of the hawk until it merged with the clouds in the haze-hung sky.

"Proper way to get your dinner," he told himself. "No begging your pardon, sir. No hat in hand. No humble pie. Just snatch whatever suits your taste and fly off."

His eyes roved back to where the hawk had hit its prey. He saw something he'd seen peripherally at the moment of the strike.

A white globe capturing a glint of sunlight...

Twilight.

From a section of mildewed carpet and a packing case that once contained a refrigerator he had devised a shelter.

"Snug."

A few feet in front of the shelter were the makings of a campfire—the empty paper bag, torn into strips and crumpled, several handfuls of sawdust, garden-tool handles, parts of picture frames, a nearly spokeless wheel of wood...

"One man's past is another

man's future."

He was addressing the odds and ends he had gathered together for the fire. He found the sentence satisfying. It conveyed a thought that lately had kept recurring to him like the refrain of a song heavy with sentimental attachments. He wondered whether the thought was his own or something he had read in a book long ago.

"'Past is prologue.' Who said that?"

Taking a bite of cheese and then a bite of bread, he chewed the mixture like a cud. He took a long swig from the bottle.

The globular object he had retrieved from the dump sat on the ground to his left. It was actually a fixture for a ceiling light—of opalescent glass with a brass-bound base. He seemed to remember something like it on the porch of a house in his childhood.

What attracted him to this particular globe was its brand-new look. It appeared to have been discarded without ever having been used. In the sun's last luminous rays its milky surface shone, its brass gleamed.

"Mac, you got it made here."

Whose voice? His? Lambert's?

Similar. The same grating hoarseness. But no, not his.

He looked up from his ruminations. A figure stood between him and the setting sun, a blurred silhouette tilted slightly forward

in a confidential attitude. The features gradually came into focus—under a fraying Panama hat was a bearded face that grinned like a gargoyle.

"Yeah, you got it made, Mac." The man's eyes settled avidly on Lambert's bottle. "White mule in person."

"Go away. I don't like company."

"Trade you, Mac. Two slugs of real nice grappa"—he patted a pocket of his tattered tweed coat—"for one slug of mule. Fair enough?"

"Stop calling me Mac. You don't know me. I don't know you. So move your goddamn butt outa here."

The man squatted on his haunches and squinted. "I know you from somewhere. That face. I never forget a face."

"Nobody knows me from anywhere. And if you don't stop making a pest of yourself I'll wrap the remains of this wagon wheel around your thick skull."

"Know what, Mac? I can't understand hardly a word you say. You talk like a man with a mouthful of broken teeth."

"That's what you're asking for yourself, mister. A mouthful of broken teeth."

"Maybe you no spikka the English. That it? You some kind of foreigner." The squatting man now sat on the brown marlaceous earth and took a flat pint bottle

from his coat pocket. "Grappa. Vino. Wine." He held the bottle aloft. It was half full of a ruby-colored fluid. "Homemade by a clean old lady of my acquaintance."

Trying to will the babbling gargoyle out of sight, Lambert silently drank from his own bottle.

"Grappa taste good. Lots of vitamins. Listen. I trade you two"—the man presented two dirty fingers as if signaling victory—"twos, dos, due, zwei, dva, deux, duo—"

"Bug off, you crazy bastard," Lambert snarled.

"Jesus, Mac, I only wish I knew what language you speak. I got a smattering of many, even Croat, but I can't understand yours at all, not a damn syllable." He raised the mouth of his bottle to cracked lips and gulped down a few ounces of wine. "What gets me, though, is your face. I swear I've seen it before."

"Nobody's seen my face before. Not in a long time anyway."

As if mesmerized by the statement, Lambert's eyes suddenly became glazed with an inward look. What did he mean—*nobody'd seen his face in a long time?*

He consulted the bottle briefly.

What he meant was that he hadn't seen it himself. He lurked behind it but he hadn't looked at it in years. He hadn't deliberately avoided the sight of it.

Or had he? No, it was the simple result of a lack of mirrors in his mode of life.

At any rate, he no longer retained the vaguest mental image of himself. If he were to try forming one, a face to fit the flat emptiness of his sensibility, it might well resemble the ugly mug of the wine-drinking clown who sat on the other side of the fire markings.

"What do I look like?" Lambert asked.

The man was sucking the last ruddy drops from the bottle, which he then flung with an awkward lateral motion toward the dump but far from its edge.

"Hey, wino." A undercurrent of menace garbled Lambert's words more than usual. "I asked you a question. How about answering?"

"Gaelic?"

"Idiot!"

"That must be it. You're speaking Gaelic. A lingo I never leaned a word of."

"Tell me what I look like and then drag your ass out of my sight."

"No, I'm wrong there. *Slainte*. Means 'To your health' in Gaelic. Why don't you and me drink to that, Mac?"

"Go to hell."

"You got a mean mouth." The man began to fumble around inside his shoddy coat, finally producing a revolver. "Maybe this'll teach you manners."

Shakily, taking aim with right eye closed, he pointed the weapon at Lambert's head. "Your bottle or your life, Mac."

Lambert peered at the barrel with drunken imperturbability. His expression somewhat resembled that with which he had regarded the diving sparrow hawk. *Killy killy killy*. This time, though, no fear diluted the dull resignation.

After a moment he lifted his stony gaze from the wobbling barrel to the blurred face under the Panama hat. Eyes met—Lambert's lifelessly cold, the other's moist with uncertainty.

"God damn you, Mac." The voice squeaked. "This thing is loaded."

Lambert drank from the bottle.

"Loaded—look!" Pointing the revolver at the dusky sky, the man pulled the trigger. The detonation was sharp, simple, briefly reverberant. "See, *sée*." He seemed unnerved by the noise. "All I want's a couple of swigs, Mac. I need it. Christ knows how I need it."

"What do I look like?"

"Oh, Jesus." The man lowered the revolver to his lap. Despairingly, he lowered his head. Tears bleared his already bleary eyes. "What the hell's life coming to? Nobody gives a damn. Nobody helps."

Deciding to ignore the pitiful fool, Lambert prepared to light his fire.

Over his upraised right knee he had cupped the brass base of the hollow white globe. Its semi-pellucid curvatures captured the fire's flame at first in ripples of orange light. Then the light consolidated itself into a glowing red orb deep in the center of the globe. Watching it was like seeing the pulsing heart of an enormous pearl.

"What's that you got there?"

On the other side of the dancing fire—in another world as far as Lambert was concerned—the man in the Panama was an indistinct shadow, his forlorn voice so meager that the flames consumed it like tissue paper in transit.

"I wish . . . you might at least . . ."

The heart of the globe, grown smaller than a cat's eye, burned with hypnotic incandescence, a feral iris near the point of combustion. He stared at it as if it were a decree of fate. If it should burst—and he expected it might momentarily—it would erase the sentient world forever. Nothing left but that infinite blankness which had belonged to the billenia before worms began weaving sodden tunnels of blind time through torrid bubbles of mud.

"Yes." Lambert hoarsely approved the possibility. "Yes, yes."

Grievously singed, wisps of words drifted across the yellow fringe of fire.

" . . . met you . . . know you . . . that face. . . hate what . . . Philadelphia . . ."

The eye was beginning to lose some of its diathermic intensity. Perhaps, thought Lambert with morose regret, it wasn't going to explode after all.

Almost imperceptibly its hot piercing redness was transformed to an orange hue that melted upon itself like sherbert in the sun, spreading into a liquid oval. Quite soon, widening and thinning, the oval encompassed the whole globe and became a radiant white light whose edges quivered with ghostly halations.

"What is this?" Lambert asked himself

" . . . what? . . ."

Lambert replied to himself. "The damn tube."

SCENE: Closeup of a young woman's face, a face so healthily attractive that it almost masks the sly purposeful sensuality peeking from the lustrous green eyes. Long black hair. Wet and shining, it falls and parts around the tan shoulders.

As the lens withdraws to enlarge the frame, it discloses that the young woman is sitting sideways on a white-webbed chaise beside a swimming pool. She wears a golden bikini which, blending with her flesh tones,

presents at first the impression of total nudity.

Lifting her green eyes, the young woman reaches up a slender hand to accept a tall frosty glass that sprouts a pineapple stick tucked amid sprigs of mint.

The donor is a man in blue bathing trunks. The change pocket bears a monogram—*L*—stitched in white that might be the symbol for the British pound. Under a sparse mat of brownish hair, his pectorals are somewhat flabby. A corresponding flabbiness exists where trunks meet waistline. Holding another frosty glass himself, he hovers ebullient with suppressed lust above the seated woman.

He speaks. She answers. He speaks again and winks a prurient eye.

The scene is soundless, but Lambert discovers he can read lips.

"A planter's punch," the man has said. "Old family recipe. Personally concocted by yours truly."

"You must have been reading my mind."

"I trust you haven't been reading mine."

The better to taste the drink the woman shifts position on the chaise. This action, a classic example of studied inadvertence, dislodges her unhooked bra. Mammary wealth pours into

view, white as ivory against the adjacent gold, emphasized by two areolas of protuberant pink.

"Wanton slut," Lambert snarls into his peppery beard.

"... why can't I . . ."

SCENE: A bedroom. Bright light filters through Venetian blinds, revealing portions of masculine furnishings—arm of a tweed-covered armchair, rectangle of kinky plaid rug, half of a tall wardrobe topped with part of a wine rack containing the foil-wrapped heads of three and a third bottles . . .

In a kingsize waterbed the flabby man and the raven-haired woman awkwardly ride the undulating billows.

Lambert pronounces a verdict. "Hooked like a wall-eyed pike."

"... let me . . ."

SCENE: A church vestry where a comically quick-motioned wedding ceremony in progress. The responses of the principals to the minister are rapid-fire incoherencies. The minister himself is afflicted with St. Vitus's dance. The best man presents the groom the ring with the sleight-of-hand quirkiness of a blackjack dealer. Five minutes are compressed into five seconds. The wedded kiss appears to shock the couple instantly apart.

SCENE: Dressed for business, the flabby man—flabby no more—sits at a breakfast table. He's trim and haggard, the once-brown hair riddled with gray. Weary eyes rest dully on jaundiced pallets of flesh.

A blue-smocked black maid appears in a starchy white apron. She sets down a plate in which is centered a warm scone, split and buttered. Then she fills his cup with steaming black coffee. To the right of his plate is a partly folded newspaper—*The Philadelphia Inqui...*

Philadelphia? Lambert wonders. Who mentioned Philadelphia recently?

Unwittingly he wonders aloud.

“...Philadelphia... I understood...”

SCENE: (continued): The woman with black hair, lovely and foxy as ever, has entered and is now sitting at the breakfast table, toying with a glass of orange juice.

“Is there anything about it in the newspaper?” she asks.

“The financial section.”

She takes the paper and goes through the back pages until she finds what she wants. She frowns as she reads. “Sounds hopeless,” she says, putting the paper aside. “Can you do anything about it?”

“Of course.” The voice lacks confidence. “There's always an angle.”

“The woman's green eyes return to the headline of the story:

LAMBERT REALTY FILES BANKRUPTCY PETITION

“Don't worry, Sheryl.” The man seizes the paper and nervously folds it several times. “I'll work my way out of this yet.”

“*The hell you will!*” Lambert tells himself and anyone else within earshot. You don't know it yet, you simpleton, but you're finished with business forever and that bitch Sheryl is already plotting to climb over the shattered remains and up the next run-of the ladder.

“...yes, that bitch Sheryl...”

SCENE: A living room dimly lighted. The darkness of a moonless night presses against the French windows. The slouching figure of a man stands there looking out at nothing, nothing. He shakes something in his right hand—a glass that tinkles with ice—and lifts it to the front of his face. With head thrown back, he drinks desperately. Finished, he flings the glass to the floor. It bounces off the thick rug but doesn't break.

Turning away from the window, the man cries out in a strangled voice.

“I'll work out of it, Sheryl.

Give me a chance. For God's sake, honey, don't leave me! That bastard Crawford isn't worth it. He'll treat you like dirt. I know him. Take my word for it, I know the slimy kind of guy he is . . . Sheryl, where *are* you? Wait a few more . . ."

So long, sucker.

An expression of utter contempt flickers through Lambert's beard. He takes the white globe and hurls it away, far beyond the perimeter of the fire's light. He hears it land with a soft thump as if on a spongy tuft of grass, not breaking.

Twenty minutes later he has drunk the rest of the white mule and fallen backward, only his head beneath the improvised shelter of carpet and packing case. Instantly he slips into a snoring sleep as deep and dreamless as the apportionment of death . . .

Awakening, he felt stagnant under a heavy blanket of dew. He struggled painfully to sit up.

The upper half of the sun was on the eastern horizon, streaking the sky with vivid banners brilliant enough to blind the human eye. The fire at his sneakered feet was damp gray ash, and across from it . . .

A white globe, *that* white globe, tilted lifelessly on its side.

A hat, a Panama yellow with age, standing on its crown.

A nickel-plated revolver beside an open hand whose palm was

creased with intricate lines of imperishable grime.

Attached to the hand an inert body, mouth and eyes agape at the buzzing of bluebottle flies.

Swaying with vertigo, Lambert finally made it to his feet.

"Sumabitch!"

For him, a cohesive recollection of an event, any event, was always as elusive as the chromatic shapes seen in a kaleidoscope. He stepped over the dead fire and looked down narrowly at the dead man. Two flies were dining on a bister paste that circled a livid hole in the right temple. Even as he studied the bearded face it underwent a slow but subtle transmogrification.

"Crawford!" Lambert inwardly recoiled from the miraculous gift of memory. "By God, it's Crawford. Once a friend, best man at my wedding, ready wit, cozening cuckoldizer, untrustworthy trustee of my assets in bankruptcy, the Philadelphia philanderer who stole my money and my wife. Oh, Crawford, you dreadful scum, you."

He bent down and picked up the globe.

"So that hard callous that passed for your conscience finally caught up with you. Yes, you erred fatally when you peeked into your past—an overdue error fully deserved. The old defenses of cynical repartee and fancy footwork apparently no longer served you."

"From a heartless opportunist you've dwindled to a whining beggar, a parched throat, a shrunken gut, a wet brain, a trembling hand. In the course of ten years—or is it twenty?—you've exchanged irresistible charm and good cologne for a stumbling mien and a meandering stench, you lousy wretch!"

"No wonder you weren't equipped to face down the terrible cruelties you inflicted on me and mine. Sheryl! You found Sheryl as silly and shallow and grasping as I did, didn't you? Unlike me, however, you soon stopped wanting her and you never loved her."

"But when you tried to boot her out of your life, telling her to crawl back to her sniveling husband"—he shuddered to a pause in order to wipe mucus with a thumb from lips spewing forth rhetoric intelligible only to the speaker—"you found you'd met your filthy match. The lady declined to be sent from your life. So in the end, during physical combat, you were obliged to dispatch her summarily in a hard and cutting way."

"A hunting knife, wasn't it? A bloody disembowelment. In your touted library with the complete works of—"

He paused, stricken by a curious realization still formative.

"It was the end of her but also the end of you as a respected member of society. A fugitive

from justice, you slunk away like a hyena and thenceforth have been crouching . . ."

This time he stopped.

How did he—Lambert—know about that murderous knife and the dirty work it did?

When the ineffable Sheryl left him with nothing but a farewell note, doubtlessly dictated by the glib Crawford (*Don't fret, my fool. Keep this in mind. Past is prologue*). He had plunged into a bottle and not come up for breath until a few years later, somewhere along the Gulf in Texas—Galveston or Corpus Christi—a derelict on docks reeking of shrimp.

Never again had Lambert returned to Philadelphia. Never again had he heard one word of Sheryl. For all he knew, she might be living a life of idyllic insouciance with the diabolical Crawford. He was reputed to own a Quakerish old house in Upper Darby whose chaste facade concealed activities appropriate to a Turkish bordello. For all Lambert knew, Sheryl may have carved a niche there for herself.

Crawford knew better. He knew Sheryl had been dead half of his lifetime. He knew that he was wanted for murder—less and less of course as he sank ever deeper into the merciful pit of anonymity.

Kneeling beside the cold body, Lambert began to search the pockets for loose change and perhaps some identification.

Sacrifice



RICHARD A. MOORE

The time left for Jimmy's mother to clear her son of murder was a matter of seconds. It was not a moment for moral niceties.

THERE WAS NO pain, no feeling at all. She was suddenly on the floor, staring at the ceiling, the sound of the gunshot still reverberating through the small house.

I shouldn't have tried to get the gun from him, she thought. If I had only talked to him some more, instead of snatching the gun away from him. He's always stubborn when you push him, and the trigger must have been pulled

when I grabbed the barrel and he jerked away.

She couldn't move but she could hear his soft, frightened sobs.

"Come to me, Jimmy." She heard him move closer and then above her his crying face, his eyes bright now because of the tears.

"Mother will be all right, Jimmy. I'll be all right. Go to the phone and dial the operator. Tell

her your mother is hurt and needs an ambulance. Just dial 0." A little wave of blackness touched her and she added, "Tell them to hurry."

Where had he found that gun, she wondered. His father had bought it during the war when he was working double shifts on the assembly line. A woman isn't safe alone at night, he had said, not in these times. She had not touched the pistol since that day except to hide it after the war. She should have thrown it away, she thought, How could I have forgotten it?

He must have found it in one of those boxes in the basement. Bored, he was just bored. If only there had been a school near by for boys like Jimmy, she thought, he wouldn't be searching for things to occupy his time. Why do the schools end when their bodies grow up? He's still just a boy.

She heard him fumble with the phone until he finally got an operator. He couldn't give the address. He could only cry and shout, "Mama's hurt! Mama's hurt!"

Her eyes closed with the effort of raising her voice. "Jimmy, just read the number on the phone." She managed a ragged deep breath. "Just read the number."

Her firm voice calmed him. He read the number for the operator, repeating it twice. From long

experience, she knew how to handle him. She knew what tack or tone to take to accomplish simple tasks. It wasn't perfect. He could be frustratingly difficult at times and she would lose her patience and say or do the wrong thing. But each success was a small victory in which she took pride. With a little help, he could do so much.

Still no pain, no feeling whatsoever. *Well, that's a blessing*, she thought. It would kill Jimmy to see her in pain while blaming himself for the cause. He didn't know what a pistol was. To him, she had tried to take away a toy, a shiny, nickel-plated toy.

Out of a corner of her eye, she could see blood soaking into the carpet. *This could be bad, I could be in the hospital for a long time*, she thought, *and where will Jimmy stay?*

Suddenly, she realized what could happen. No amount of pleading would make them see it was an accident. A retarded child might escape the stigma, but Jimmy was over six feet tall and he would be institutionalized. A history of violence, his records would say, and those words would be a life sentence.

I'll tell them he had nothing to do with it, she thought. But a hard, cold lump in her chest moved and she knew it was death's first groping touch. Without her, he wouldn't stand a chance. It was his inevitable

future. The easy label was there and his innocent confusion would damn him all the more. Her only hope for him after her death was a halfway house. He might survive, given help. Now that wouldn't be.

He knelt beside her and put his face on her shoulder. *Take the guilt from this boy, she prayed, he's never had a chance in this world.*

"That's all right, Jimmy. It wasn't your fault. You didn't know." She wished her arms could hold him. "I want you to forget about this. You hear me now, Jimmy. Forget what happened. You don't know anything. You were in another room." Her voice grew urgent. "You were in another room. Can you say that?"

His head nodded against her chest. "I was in another room."

"You don't know anything about it," she said.

"Don't know anything," he said.

She was almost panting from the effort of speaking, thinking. But she had to continue.

"Get the gun, Jimmy. Bring it to me."

Slowly, he moved from her and returned with the pistol.

"Hold it carefully now. Pull out your shirt tail and wipe it clean. Easy now," she said.

He had the pistol in the hammock of his shirt, happy to be

helping her, trying to please her.

"Pick up my hand, Jimmy, and put my fingers around it where I can see, on the floor." She looked with satisfaction at the barrel in her limp fingers.

"That's good. That's good. Now remember what I told you to say. You don't know anything."

His head bobbed vigorously, and she closed her eyes to rest.

Well, at least his fingerprints are off the gun, she thought, and if I die, he'll follow my last instructions for the rest of his life. Maybe then, they'll believe it was just a silly old woman who shot herself by mistake.

Pleased, she drifted with the weary waves of exhaustion. She dreamed of her husband, dead now for fifteen years. He had died from disappointments—bad jobs, a boy who couldn't play catch, burdens he didn't understand.

"Patience, Joe," she murmured, "Patience."

A vague shadowy face floated above her and from far away, shouted down. "You're going to be all right, Ma'am. You're going to be all right. We're almost to the hospital." The face drifted away but from a distance the voice still shouted. "You better make this thing move!"

Somewhere, she thought she heard someone crying endlessly but she smiled, still in her dream.

"It'll get better, Joe. It just has to."

THERE WAS movement, a frenzy of movement around her and she heard two voices arguing.

"I've got to talk with her," said one.

"Officer, if you don't stop badgering me while I'm trying to save her life, I'll report you," said the other.

Jesus, she prayed, let me have the strength. "Officer,"

"Yes Ma'am. I'm right here."

"I grabbed the gun. I shouldn't have grabbed the gun." Her mind whirled. That wasn't what I wanted to say, she thought. But she had lost her story somewhere in the fog.

The voice repeated a question she had missed. "Was it a burglar?"

"Yes," she sighed, thankful for the help, thankful to be able to relax now. "Yes, a burglar. I grabbed the gun and it went off."

The other voice interrupted, "You got what you need. Now get out of my way."

Thank you, she thought, thank you for the story. It may do. It'll have to. She wanted to whisper her gratitude, but he was gone now and only the bending shadows remained.

"Wake up," someone called, but she fought against it. It was the best time of the day. Jimmy

was in bed and she could nap freely on the sofa, the television chattering to itself in the background.

Why should I get up? she thought stubbornly. I've done enough for today.

But the voices called her name urgently. *Oh, but this is so nice, she begged, and I've earned this much.*

But their need pulled at her, pleaded with her. Something was left undone. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes and fought to bring the faces into focus.

"Here she is," said an excited voice.

"I'm tired," she murmured. "Let me rest."

"Yes Ma'am. There's just one thing only you can do for us. We have a suspect. He was picked up near your house and we think he's the one who shot you." The voice paused for a moment. "Only you can make the identification. Your son can't help us. We need you to look at this man and tell us if he is the one. We have to do it now."

There was a quick movement and a strange man stood before her.

"Is this the man who shot you?"

"Yes," she said. "That is the man."

She closed her eyes and shut out the angry noise of the world. She had done all she could. Now she could rest.

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SPEAK TO ME, MARCEL



by R. EDWARD MOORE

The Homicide Bureau Knew Evans Was a Killer—but Once He Beat the Lie Detector They Had No Way to Hold Him.

HE SAT IN the chair—his feet up, his left arm draped across his legs, his right hand on top of it holding a lit cigarette—staring at a poster on the opposite wall while the phone rang and rang beside him.

Police Detective Armando "Adam" Passeretti watched him closely for a moment before easing open the door with his fingertips. He looked into a cheap weekly-rate hotel room—bare walls with peeling paint, one bed, a dresser and mirror, the stuffed chair the man was sitting in and the straight-backed one his feet

were on. Passeretti couldn't see a suitcase, but it might have been hidden by the dangling bedclothes.

"Mr. Evans?" he called in an even voice. "Mr. Evans!" He repeated it more loudly.

Evans, a middle-aged man in well-cut but ill-kempt clothes jumped fractionally and looked up at Passeretti with beaten blue eyes. He raised a finger and lifted the phone. "Yes, thank you," he said and hung up. "Yes?" he said, looking again at Passeretti.

"Mr. Evans," he said, producing his identification and backing slightly toward the door as if to enter again. "I'm Detective Passeretti of the Providence Police. Do you mind if I come . . . that is, I'd like to ask you a few questions." He paused for a moment. "I don't usually enter someone's room like this, but the phone was ringing and the door was open a crack and I saw you . . ."

Evans motioned him into the room, recrossed his legs and lit a fresh cigarette. "Have I done something?"

"Mr. Evans, there was a murder, a very brutal murder, last night. We have reason to believe that you were in the area at the time. That you might have seen or heard something . . ."

"Ah. A material witness or that sort of thing? Well, tough break for the good guys, but I was in my room all last night and there was nothing at all unusual happening here."

Passeretti glanced around the room again, noting only a sink in the corner that needed plumbing work. "If I might ask," he said, "doing what? Reading? Entertaining?"

Evans pursed his lips into a smile and looked back at the poster. "Is this Vice or Homicide?"

"It's just that I can't see what was so fascinating about this room that would keep you in on a night

as hot as last night."

"I was just sitting." Evans looked back. "It may seem hard to believe, but this is my vacation. This is the way I like to spend it. Nothing to do, nothing to think about. Just . . . sitting."

Passeretti cleared his throat and pulled at his shirt where the sweat had plastered it against his back. "Ah, Mr. Evans, our information is that you were *not* in your room last night and that you were, as a matter of fact, very near the scene of the murder within a minute after the shots were fired."

Evans merely continued to stare.

"I'll have to ask you to come down to the Station with me if you don't want to answer the questions here."

"Am I a suspect?"

Passeretti looked briefly at his shoes, then back at Evans with clear eyes. "At this moment, yes, sir, you are."

Evans put his feet on the floor and hoisted himself into an upright position. He was tall, 6'5", at least. "Astounding," he said as he reached for his jacket on the back of the straight chair. "A man on vacation, his first time in a town, and someone places him at the scene of a murder, a . . ."—he looked briefly at Passeretti—"a positive identification, it seems. Truly astounding." He slipped his coat on with uncommon grace. "Well, Mother always said that

the only way to enjoy a new place was to meet the people . . . ”

PASSERETTI SNARLED at a fly that buzzed across his face as he slumped back at his desk. It was hot and muggy, the way Rhode Island gets during the summer—no breeze, 80% humidity, heat and exhaust fumes. The fly buzzed past again and Passeretti felt a faint stirring of air from its passage. He wondered how many flies he'd have to trap to get the equivalent of a small electric fan.

Maureen Sullivan waggled up, stirring the air and more. She slid her hip on his desk and tossed a pile of reports onto Murray's IN basket. "Cheer up, Bunky," she growled huskily. "Today's only Tuesday. You'll never make it to the end of the week if you start out like this."

Passeretti looked at her radiant face and smiled wistfully. "You wanna cheer me up? Buy me lunch."

She consulted some mystical tote-board for a moment. "Okay. It'll have to be McConnal's, though. I squandered my check on rent and food this week."

He'd meant to be facetious and her acquiescence surprised him. He grabbed his jacket and slung it across his shoulder, following her out of the room.

Sitting in the chrome booth waiting for their orders to come,

Passeretti felt the depression creeping up on him again. He watched the traffic flow past and wondered if he'd ever be more than "adequate" at anything. He shook his head. Those thoughts were reserved for Thursday nights. No particular reason.

Still, he thought to cheer himself up, Maureen's presence was perhaps the nicest thing he could remember out of the past couple of months. Working in the Department for the summer on a C.E.T.A. program so she could continue an oft-interrupted education in the fall, she was a fount of wisdom and her interests ranged from ballistics to ballet.

Why she had accepted such a low-paying job was beyond him. He had never had the right opportunity to ask, it seemed, either about that or a lot of other things. Like out to dinner, or a show.

Looking at her, cherishing her misty Irish features, her long red-brown hair, he wondered why she chose his company at all, let alone as often as she did. He was as Italian as she was Irish, a little shorter than she and 10 years older. She had once said that she admired his "grand sense of egalitarianism."

He'd told her that he didn't even try to look up words that long and, anyway, he had an Italian dictionary—all the words ended with *a*. She'd laughed and he'd felt tall, handsome and witty. He tried to conjure up a bit of

that feeling as their food came.

"Well," he said as he pounded the bottom of the ketchup bottle, "I suppose today hasn't been *that* bad. Silverman only yelled at me for five minutes and didn't once call me a 'dumb wop'." The ketchup spurted out of the bottle and splashed his hamburger and fries in addition to a good portion of the table. He hid his head in his hands as the waitress mopped up the mess.

"Oh?" asked Maureen as she filched one of his fries to go with her diet cola. "Was that about Evans?"

"What? Does the whole world know?" he demanded. "Even the clerks . . ." He stopped short of insulting her. "I'm sorry. It's just that Silverman's hopping mad about that. But who would have thought he'd demand a lie-detector test on the spot? Hell, I'd hardly gotten through his Rights. No, as a matter of fact, it was even *before* I'd finished them!"

"What's so bad about that? If he is the professional everyone seems to think he is, it's not as though anyone expected him to confess or anything."

"Of course not, but we figured a little pressure might turn the game in our favor a bit. We're pretty sure that we could trace this hit back to Petrucci or some of his boys since whoever hit Gino was part of the Organized Crime . . . and so on and so forth," he finished, seeing her expression.

"Well, you know all that, anyway."

"I watch the news."

"Okay. But the problem is that, instead of doing any of the normal things, he demands a lie-detector test and proves that he wasn't within a mile of the shooting—even though we know he did it."

"Yeah," she said, sipping his chocolate shake, "but since a polygraph isn't admissible in court, what difference does it make?"

"It can't be used to convict," he corrected, "but it can be used to *clear* a subject. So now, if we keep nosing around Evans, he can scream harassment. We can't even hold him in the state! He'd have a judge down on us so fast that we'd look foolish."

"Again."

Passeretti cringed at the mention of two notable embarrassments of the past year. Detectives had had nothing to do with either of them, but everyone lived under the shadow of the past.

"Sorry," she said, sipping her soda. "What I heard, though, was that he actually demanded a *polygraph* test. Was that his word? Polygraph?"

Passeretti tried to remember. "Yeah. That's what he said, as a matter of fact." He shook his head. "Well, we now know that rumor is at least accurate."

"No," she said, "this is important. On the average, how many people really know what a so-called lie-detector is?"

He shrugged, feeling a little irritated. "CBS did a story on it some time ago. But I guess most people still think of it as a lie-detector. Why?"

She bit her upper lip. "And when you went to his room, he was just . . . sitting there?"

"Yeah. I thought it was a little strange. The phone was ringing and he was just sitting there smoking, as if he was waiting for . . ."

"Smoking or just holding a cigarette?"

"Jesus, I don't know. How many people hold a cigarette and don't smoke it? Listen," he said peevishly, "when we go back, you take my job and I'll take yours. Silverman can't stand yelling at women."

She touched his hand. "Don't get all defensive. I'm not attacking you, I'm just feeding my curiosity. I've got to do something to keep from going crazy in this job. And besides, there's something in the back of my head saying that this is all so familiar, something I must have read recently." She furrowed her brow for a moment, then shook her head.

Passeretti hit his knee under the table with his fist. He was definitely blowing it. His personal feelings aside, if she could figure out something to hold Evans and they got a shot at Petrucci, it would go a long way toward improving the Department's tarnished reputation. What was he

getting so jittery about? He ran through the scene in Evans' room again to calm himself and to reaffirm his objectivity.

"Wait a minute." He closed his eyes. "He wasn't just staring. He was staring at, or in the direction of, a poster. It was the only thing on the walls and he had the chairs set up so he could look at it comfortably. It was," he added, anticipating her next question, "one of those black and white posters that were all over town for the past couple of weeks—some theater thing . . ."

"Marceau! Uh . . . Marcel Marceau, the mime. He was at Brown last weekend."

"That's right. Evans said that he'd gone to the performance Saturday night and took a poster to brighten up his room."

"Marceau . . . ?" Maureen closed her eyes briefly and bit her lower lip. Passeretti wondered if there was a significance to her lip-biting. She scowled and groaned in exasperation. "If only I could think . . ."

Passeretti smiled. "Look, I don't mind answering all your questions—I really don't—but would you mind answering one for me?"

She looked up.

"What are you doing?"

"I think," she said, "your friend Evans set you up. You did just what he wanted you to and now he can walk out of town any time he feels like it."

"Don't remind me. But what makes you think so . . . other than the obvious fact that he's done it?"

"Polygraph. What did he say his business was? Jewelry? Hardware. Not the sort of business where you'd pick up a term like that."

"But," he interjected, ticking off the points on his fingers, "first CBS *did* do a piece on polygraphs recently. Second, polygraph tests are used in industry very commonly these days. Third, he could have done some reading and come across it. Fourth—"

"Does that explain how he beat it?" she asked.

"Uh, no."

"Are you saying that he didn't kill Gino?"

"We know he did. He must have."

"Then," she said, folding his fingers back into his fist, "put these away and accept the fact that there's an answer we're overlooking."

"Female intuition? A hunch? Mysticism?" He was losing control and he stopped himself. "Look, I'd like to believe in hunches but his use of a single word is a pretty thin bit of evidence."

"One word? You yourself admit that"—she ticked off the points—"first, CBS did a piece that described the sorts of changes polygraphs measure. Second, they're readily available for industrial applications, so why not for

others? Third, there has been a lot written about them lately." A brief look or recognition crossed her face, then faded. "What was four?"

He closed his mouth slowly, uncomprehendingly. "I can't remember."

She tapped the side of her head. "There's something there. It just may take a little time to come out."

"Oh." He wondered if his lack of enthusiasm showed. She leaned across the table and patted his cheek.

"Your problem, Adam, is that you disbelieve something so hard that it becomes impossible." She picked up the check and frowned. "A lot of things," she added, her eyebrows quivering. Looking up sharply, she said, "Listen, if I come up with something to get you off the hook, you have to take me out to dinner. And maybe a movie. Deal?"

"Sure," he muttered, scarcely daring to breathe. She rummaged in the bottom of her purse for loose change to make up the bill. "I'll get it," he said, reaching for his wallet. "I was just kidding about your buying."

"I wasn't," she answered, looking up at him through her bangs.

He knew better than to argue.

Marcel Marceau stared at him all morning. Passeretti had found one of the posters and had brought it to work, hoping against hope

that the mute picture would tell him something. Maureen had mentioned it once more as she was leaving last night. The face on the poster was as blank as Passeretti's mind. The state Police had come up with nothing encouraging and Evans had a ticket on an afternoon flight.

The one bright note of the day had been Silverman's arrival. Feeling buoyed with optimism about Maureen's promised information, Passeretti had looked up cheerily and had greeted him with a bright, "Good Morning, Lieutenant!" Silverman had looked shocked and avoided him all morning.

IT WAS JUST before noon when Silverman called him into his office.

"What's this about your girl-friend in the typing pool having come up with something on Evans?"

Passeretti was both shocked and thrilled by the words. Shocked because no one was supposed to know unless she found what she'd been trying to remember (but, if she'd remembered, why hadn't she told him?). Thrilled that Silverman thought she might be his girl-friend. He shriveled. Silverman had an odd way with words.

"I have no idea," he replied as briskly as possible, not knowing what else to do. Silverman hated

him. Hated all Italians. They'd moved into his neighborhood and the property values had dropped—he said. Passeretti sighed.

"Well, she's on her way in here now," Silverman said, "and it better be good. Discussing official business with the summer help."

Maureen knocked and entered in time to save his having to reply. She dropped into a chair and flopped a magazine on the desk. What looked like a science fiction mind-control machine glared luridly from the cover.

Silverman picked it up between thumb and forefinger. "What's this?" he asked with distaste. "Some sort of do-it-yourself lunatic magazine?"

"*Psychology Today*," she corrected, looking at him blankly. Passeretti saw a hint of reproof around her mouth. "It's a respectable magazine. Hardly a Catholic on the staff."

Silverman flinched and looked pained.

"The article on Lie Detection. Page 107. You'll be interested in it." She sat back, waiting.

Silverman thumbed through it skeptically, pausing to look at some of the pictures. He pursed his lips meditatively, found the page she'd marked and began scanning the article. "Psychophysiological techniques?" he inquired dubiously, stumbling over the word.

"Keep going."

He glared briefly at her and

plunged back into the article. Suddenly he sat straight up in the chair and whistled silently. Nodding to himself, his eyes danced over the page again, a smile forming on his thin lips.

"Right!" he said, dropping the magazine back to the desk.

Passeretti felt unnerved. "What is it?"

Silverman leaned back in his chair with the air of a man explaining the obvious. "A couple of brain-boys from the Air Force have discovered that the techniques of bio-feedback, that's alpha wave control in the brain, and autohypnosis can be used to beat the polygraph test.

"A good operator can judge the responses normally with about 80% accuracy or better. But in experiments with people trained on these techniques, accuracy dropped to about 24%—less than pure chance. It means that Evans' polygraph test is worthless."

"Swell," said Passeretti. "The judge is gonna love those statistics."

Silverman lost a bit of his smile. "Well, we can present this as cause to have Evans detained . . ." He tapered off.

"Maybe," said Passeretti to fill the sudden silence. "But he'll argue that we can't prove he beat the machine and, being innocent until proven guilty, we'll have to let him go."

Silverman sucked his cheeks hollow and didn't even bother to

lecture Passeretti about lecturing him.

There was a small silence and both men found themselves slowly turning toward Maureen.

She sighed. "I thought you'd have figured it out by yourselves . . . Evans *was* using some form of autohypnosis. We have Detective Passeretti's testimony and some corroborative information from the telephone girl at the hotel. Furthermore—"

"We have *what*?" demanded Silverman, springing forward in his chair and landing on his hands.

Passeretti hid his face in his hands. He wasn't sure which side he was on any longer.

"Passeretti saw him in a sort of trance. Self-hypnosis is simply a very aggressive form of the 'willing suspension of disbelief.' We all use it—like, when you watch a show on the T.V. you *know* it isn't real, but you suspend your disbelief, and you allow yourself to believe it for a little while. Children don't have that disbelief, so they're afraid of monster movies and the like."

"Anyway, hypnosis of any sort is the same thing. You, as the subject, allow yourself to believe something that you know isn't true—like that you're asleep, or that you were nowhere near a murder. That's what Evans was doing when Adam walked in."

They both continued to stare at her.

"The telephone was ringing but he didn't seem to hear it. He couldn't hear it, he was so involved in his trance. That's why he was holding a lit cigarette. Passeretti saw him start when he called his name the second time. But since he could ignore the wake-up call he'd left with the switch-board girl—by the way, he'd left instructions for her to call him *three minutes* after he hung up, in case anyone had bothered to ask her—why," she continued turning to Passeretti, "would he have heard you?"

"I called his name," Passeretti answered. "There's something very compelling about that."

"More compelling than a loud telephone beside you? Can you ignore a ringing phone?"

"But what woke him up if it wasn't the telephone and it wasn't me?"

"The cigarette. It burned down to his fingers and the pain brought him out of it. Self-preservation is a basic urge and one that's difficult to suppress, even in trance. It was his back-up in case the phone didn't wake him. But that's all beside the point. He could have been using T.M. or deep breathing, it's all the same.

"He demanded the polygraph test right away, forfeiting his right to a lawyer's presence and everything, right on the spot—while he was still fresh. It wasn't just to make him seem innocent; it was necessary. If he were prac-

ticed at autohypnosis or any of these other techniques, he could probably deny things he did years ago.

"He could even convince you he wasn't taking the test. But since he had to have something to concentrate on, the poster, he's probably no better than average, if that—which means that, if you'd held him a couple of hours, he wouldn't have been able to come out completely clean."

"But what about the poster?" demanded Passeretti, thinking of the stark face staring up from his own desk. "How does that figure into this?"

"Oh, that. That has nothing to do with it, really."

Passeretti groaned inwardly.

"Well, it *is* what put me on to a long string of things that led me to my conclusions and that *is* what he used to focus his attention. Did you notice that the face was rather tranquil? That's what suggest to me that he's not that good. The poster lent him the aura of peace he needed to pull it off. Whenever he felt his control slipping, he probably formed an image of the face and it relaxed him—sort of like alpha-wave control.

"More important for me, though, was the connection it made. See, Evans had studied mime a little, or had picked up some of the basic techniques somewhere along the way. Mime

is a very demanding art. You've got to convince the audience that there's a real world surrounding you—other people, walls, doors, stairs, everything—using nothing but the movement of your body."

She illustrated her point with her hands. Passeretti could have sworn that, for an instant, there was a wall of clear glass where she showed it to be. He shook his head and it was just her hands moving *as if* they were on a wall. He began to understand.

"So," he interrupted, remembering the graceful way Evans had put on his coat—almost as if it didn't matter whether it was there or not, "to make *us* believe that there's something there, *you* have to believe it's there. That willing suspension of disbelief sort of inside out."

"Exactly. When a mime, even a good novice, is showing you something, she—or he—will actually be able to see it, to feel it, to step in, on or over it. So Evans had the right sort of background and may just have picked up a little autohypnosis, alpha and maybe T.M. on his own. He is an extremely well-read person."

Silverman's mouth couldn't seem to decide between a scowl or a smile. "So, what you're saying is that if we got Evans to take another polygraph test, he'd fail? No gimmicks? But how are we going to make sure he doesn't

go into another trance?"

Maureen shrugged. "I don't think it'll be a problem. First, the shock of having to take another one, due to a malfunction or whatever you use as an excuse, will be enough to put him off balance. He'll have to play along to maintain his posture of innocence but, second—as I said—I don't think he's that good and, since he thought he was free and clear, he wouldn't have bothered to reinforce the suggestions."

"If you're all that worried about it, though, I'd suggest moving the polygraph into the storage room next to the ladies room in the basement. The subsonics in the ventilators will depress the hell out of him. That should prevent him from concentrating."

Silverman and Passeretti stared at each other.

"He'll fail with flying colors. And, since he's waived his rights in a manner of speaking, you might just have the chance to tickle something out of him. Keep him in that room, though—it'll have him sobbing hysterically within an hour."

She exhaled and rose to leave.

Silverman held his hand out to stop her. "Just one thing. How did you know Evans knew mime?"

Maureen smiled beautifully. "I was coming out of the ladies room . . ."

"In the basement, where the polygraph is," guessed Silverman.

"... in the basement." she nodded. "I guess he'd just finished his little act and was on his way out when I bumped into him. I guess I looked upset—I tell you, the ventilators down there are deadly—so he said something chauvinistic and flattering and we got talking. He seemed like a nice enough fellow and mentioned Marceau's performance in the course of conversation."

She plunked an elbow on a non-existent bar and raised an imaginary glass. Silverman and Passeretti both blinked. "You might say," she added, "we had a couple of drinks together, y'know?" She lifted her elbow and

the bar disappeared.

Passeretti walked to where it had been and peered longingly into the empty space.

"Oh!" she said in exasperation. "*Here.* Finish mine." She forced the glass into his hand, and taking her magazine, turned and walked out of the office.

Passeretti stared stupidly at his hand, almost believing that it held a glass.

Maureen poked her head back into the office suddenly. "Hey Passeretti! Lunch? Dutch?"

He nodded and tossed off the drink, leaving the glass on the bar as he hurried out of Silverman's office after her.

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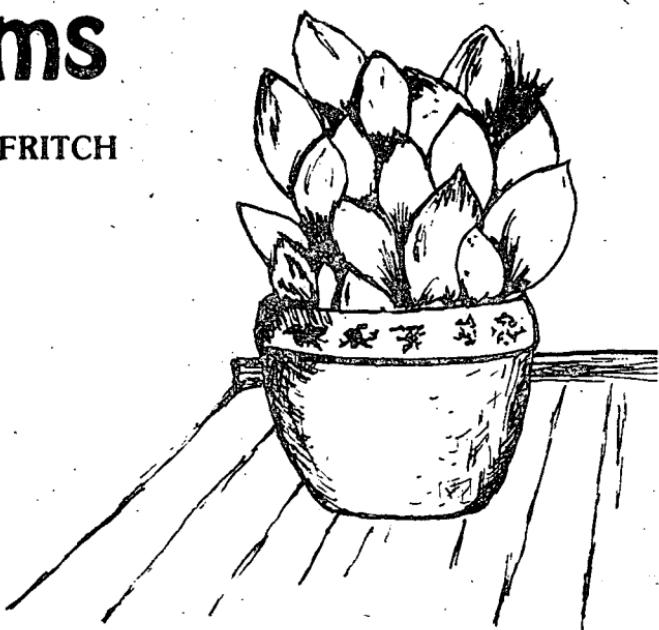
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Murder Blooms

CHARLES E. FRITCH



Grissom's wife was vulnerable. Unfortunately for him, her prized plant was not.

"I'M GOING TO kill you," Harry Grissom told the potted plant. He stuck his face close to the golden petals and scowled menacingly. "I'm going to take you in my hands and rip you apart and then flush you down the toilet. What do you think of that?"

If the plant felt menaced, it gave no sign.

Yet it struck back with the means his wife had given it to

retaliate.

Harry's nose twitched. His eyes watered. He sneezed.

He quickly retreated to a safe distance, cursing Flora and the bug spray she used to protect her precious flower.

He raised trembling hands. "What I'd *really* like to do, of course," he reminded himself again, "is put these hands around Flora's throat and sque-e-e-e-e..."

He closed his eyes and clenched his fists and smiled as the pleasant fantasy filled his thoughts.

"What—are—you—doing?"

The shrill female voice startled him.

"I hope," Flora Grissom said sternly, sweeping into the room like some avenging wraith, "you haven't been upsetting Daisy. You know how sensitive she is."

Harry bit back the bitter words that leaped to his lips. A flower, sensitive to cross words? How ridiculous. How utterly absurd!

At one time he had entertained thoughts of having Flora committed as insane because she talked to flowers, but then some crackpot scientist came up with the theory that plants actually prospered when ordinary, sane people had one-way conversations with them, soothed the leafy darlings with soft words lovingly spoken.

Bah!

There was, of course, the other way, the without-a-doubt-permanent way that Hilda had suggested more than once. Hilda was a young, vibrant woman, unlike the scrawny, aging Flora, and Hilda as much as said she wasn't going to wait forever.

"Make it look like an accident," Hilda had said. "Or a surprised burglar. Then you'll have Flora's money—and me!"

It sounded good—especially the part about getting Flora's money—the twenty thousand

dollars in a savings account in her name only—and about having Hilda.

"There, there, Daisy darling," Flora cooed to the plant. "Did the big bad man scare my little snookums? Don't be afraid, sweetie, mommy's here."

Harry's insides churned. He didn't know if it was the bug spray still infesting his nostrils, the one-way conversation he was listening to or merely that Flora was in the same room with him and he could no longer stomach her.

One thing was certain—he could not go on this way. Divorce or separation was not the answer. He'd have to go back to work then, in order to support himself, and he certainly could not also support Hilda—at least not in the style in which she'd like to be supported. Twenty thousand dollars was not a lot of money, but if it were invested wisely—say on sure things at the track—it could easily grow into a hundred times that amount.

Straightening, Flora fixed her husband with a hawklike stare. "I want you to stay away from Daisy. You've been upsetting her with your harsh words."

"Oh?" Harry said with mock innocence. "Is that what she told you?"

"You're wasting your sarcasm on me, Harry Grissom," she snapped. "My plants are better friends than you've ever been,"

and you're my husband—in name anyway."

Harry flinched at the barb. His wife's name was Flora, but a more appropriate name would be Cactus. The plants were indeed her friends, but one plant in particular—the yellow-petaled Daisy—had captured her attention and her affection.

She was constantly fussing over the flower, digging carefully into the earth surrounding its roots, measuring in chemicals into the earth surrounding its roots, measuring in chemicals that would ensure its continued good health, spraying a sickening mist that was supposed to take care of marauding insects.

"Don't bugs have a right to exist, too?" Harry had asked her once.

"In certain places, yes," she had replied, unruffled by his comment.

He couldn't stand the spray, or the plant, or Flora herself. More than once he had entertained the notion of throttling the plant with his bare hands—oh, Lord, now he was thinking of the plant as a live creature himself—but then Flora would be angry and perhaps angry enough to get rid of him.

She seemed truly to love the flower, more than she ever had her husband. At first, he was grateful for that, because it left him time to pursue other interests—like luscious Hildy,

whom he had met one golden afternoon in the unemployment line.

There were places he'd rather be, but Flora insisted the pension from her late husband was barely enough for them and her new husband should institute at least a token search for work, despite his own insistence that no one would hire him because of his bad back.

Trapped in the employment line, Harry had got to talking with the voluptuous blonde. Hildy was a divorcee whose husband had run off with another woman to another country, leaving her with a need to find some suitable means of support.

She invited Harry over to her modest apartment for a drink and a few laughs. Harry didn't mention his bad back, and neither of them noticed anything wrong with it.

There had been many such pleasant interludes, but Hildy was rapidly growing restless.

"I'm going to change my will," Flora said.

The words didn't register right away on Harry's mind. When they did, he couldn't speak for an instant. He managed, hoarsely, "Change your will? In what way?"

She smiled grimly. "Oh, you'll still get the money, don't worry. But I don't like to think that Daisy will be neglected if I pass away suddenly."

"Pass away?" Harry forced a laugh. "What makes you think you're going to pass away—suddenly?"

"I've got a premonition that..." She shook her grey head. "Oh well, never mind about that. What I'm going to do is give you all the money—with one provision."

Harry waited, fear icycling his spine.

"You've got to live alone here in this house and take care of Daisy for me," Flora went on. "Daisy must outlive me by at least a year. If she doesn't, the money goes to charity."

Harry began to tremble with anger and frustration. "You—you *can't* do that. I don't know anything about taking care of a plant!"

"Then you'll have to learn, won't you?" she said simply. Her eyes narrowed. "I don't want your girlfriend in this room any more, either."

Harry jerked as though struck a physical blow. "Wha-a-a-at?"

Flora smirked. "Thought I didn't know about her, huh? Well, I know everything."

Everything was a lot to know. Harry chewed his lip. He had told Hildy about the plant, of course, and they had laughed at his crazy wife's affection for it. Hildy had this idea about wanting to see the thing, so one day when Flora was visiting the doctor for a checkup, he had brought

Hildy to the house and shown her the plant.

Hildy had made obscene remarks strong enough to make the daisy wither, and they both had a big laugh out of the adventure. Daisy, surrounded by her protective mist of perfume, had not been visibly affected by the tirade.

For a dreadful moment, Harry just stood there, not knowing what to do, his eyes searching Flora's thin smirking face. Somehow, she knew about Hildy. He didn't know how she could have learned of it—they had always been so careful—but that didn't matter. What mattered was that she knew. And now she was going to change her will unless he stopped her.

Visions of twenty thousand dollars and Hildy danced before his eyes and then were suddenly obliterated.

"No!" he cried, and before he could even think of what he was doing, he had his strong hands around Flora's frail neck, squeezing, squeezing, just as he had practiced in his imagination so many times before.

The woman's scrawny fingers clawed weakly at him. Her eyes bulged. Rasping noises crackled from her throat.

An instant before she expired, Harry realized he was committing murder, but on the heels of this realization came another—it was too late to back down now.

He applied extra pressure, and she died and her body went slack like a wilting flower.

For a moment the room was filled with silence broken only by Harry's swift breathing. "I've killed her," he told himself finally. "I've actually killed her. I've got to tell Hildy. No, wait. First, I've got to make it look like an accident—or that somebody broke in."

She was obviously strangled, so the accident was ruled out. But an intruder coming in to rob the place, being surprised and having to kill the woman of the house—ah, that was something else.

Harry hurried from one room to another, turning over chairs, pulling out drawers. He took twelve dollars from the cookie jar in the kitchen and broke the jar on the floor, leaving some small change in the debris. Returning to the living room, he broke a pane of glass in one of the windows and unfastened the lock where the top half joined the bottom.

An alibi. He had to have an alibi. He didn't look at Flora's face as he lifted her wrist, set her wrist-watch at a half-hour ahead and then smashed it against the floor, cracking the crystal and stopping the movement.

So far, so good. The time of her death would be established, thanks to the broken watch,

at an hour when he would be in the employment office, dutifully looking for work as a loving husband should.

Harry felt elated at how well things were going.

He paused at the door, turned and surveyed the room again to see if he had missed anything. His eyes darted here and there, finally fastened on the yellow-flowered potted plant.

"Might as well kill two flowers with one murder," he chortled.

Eagerly, he crossed the room and, with one sweep of his hand, hurled the plant to the floor. When he left the house, he made sure the front door was ajar.

Harry Grissom was very pleased. A little nervous, perhaps—but after all, this was his first murder, and even though he had come to dislike Flora very much, he did have *some* feelings. But overall, he felt he now had the formerly nasty old world by the proverbial short hairs.

He'd have to suffer through the police investigation and pretend to be grief stricken by Flora's demise, but he was sure he could pull it off. His incentive was twenty thousand dollars and the love of a beautiful woman.

He arrived at the employment office just in time to telephone the police from a pay phone. He said he was a neighbor of the Grissom's who had been walking past the house and had heard all manner of screaming and the

noise of things being thrown. Then he hung up, without giving a name.

After which, he marched boldly to a clear window at the counter marked JOBS and raised a terrible fuss about the employment office not being able to get a job for a man who was not only willing but anxious to find one to support him and his wife.

The girl at the counter sent Harry to see a hard-faced man who asked about Harry's back, was delighted to hear it had been magically restored, and who was only too happy to give Harry referrals to three unskilled labor jobs.

When he got home, shouting, "*Flora, great news. I think I've got a job,*" the police were there, waiting for him.

"*Flora dead?*" Harry sank, stunned, into a chair when he heard the news. "That's impossible. When I left her, she was fine. How did it happen?"

"We thought you might be able to give us details on that, Mr. Grissom."

"*Me? I think not. You see, I was at the employment office. I can prove that—*"

The policeman held up his hand to shut off the torrent of words. "Before you go into that, Mr. Grissom, let me read you your rights."

Harry listened, puzzled as the officer told him he had the right to remain silent and so forth.

Then he asked, "May I see her?" It would be the natural thing for a husband to ask.

"Certainly." The policeman held the door open for him.

Flora lay stretched out on the floor, as ugly in death as she had been in life, but more agreeable. Beside her lay the remains of the plant he had destroyed, the pot cracked and bleeding dirt over the rug. In that dirt—Harry leaned forward curiously to get a better look—was a small, shiny black object that glistened darkly and a wire terminating in a tiny knobby piece of plastic with holes in it.

"Your wife's plant contained a bug, Mr. Grissom," the officer said.

"That's impossible," Harry said. "Not with all that spray she put on it."

The policeman failed to suppress his smile. "I don't mean that kind of a bug. I mean a *microphone* bug. Apparently she was suspicious of you and wanted to record what you had to say. She did, too. And we might never have found it if the pot hadn't been pushed onto the floor."

"*No!*" Harry cried. He thought of the twenty thousand dollars and of beautiful Hildy, lost and gone from him forever.

"There's an old saying," the policeman said with a wry smile, "that daisies don't tell. Well, here's one that *did!*"

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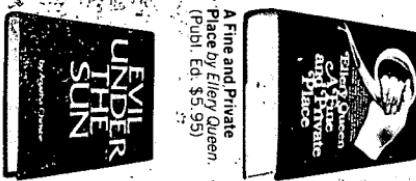
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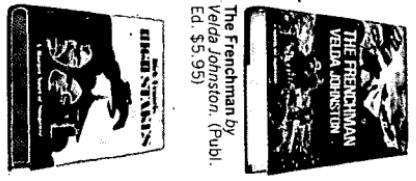
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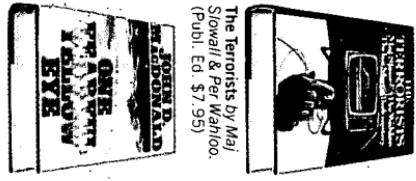
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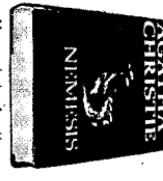
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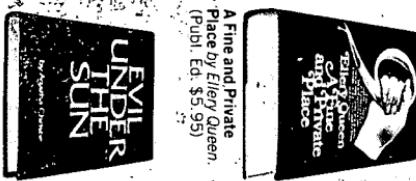
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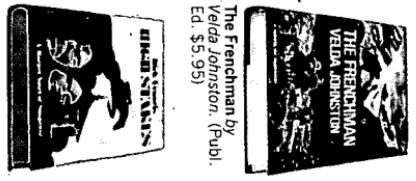
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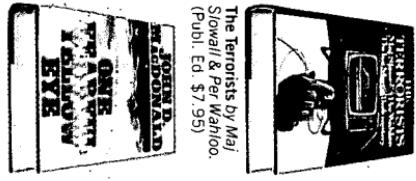
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